

Strategies for Supporting Social Behavior in the Classroom

Handling behavior regulation difficulties with children isn't just about what you do during a child's difficulty — your actions before and after can make a difference, too! Follow these steps to effectively approach self-regulation in every stage, from prevention to aftermath.

What to do BEFORE difficulties... There are certain behaviors and strategies you can implement to reduce the risk of loss of self-regulation behaviors taking place. Take a look at these tactics:

1. Talk about emotions

The most important thing to do is talk with kids about expectations and emotions. Try role-playing so the children have opportunities to think about how to handle their emotions in a positive way when they become upset or frustrated.

2. Know your students

Get to know your students by talking often about their likes and dislikes and what makes them happy or sad. Finding out what causes them to become upset is the key in recognizing when a loss of self-regulation may be looming. Notice their facial expressions, body language, and notice which times of the day are most difficult for them.

3. Pay attention

Once you know a child's possible triggers, many episodes can be prevented by keeping a close eye on how they're doing throughout the day. Many emotional reactions start off because a child is hungry, tired or bored. If you can recognize those signs, you'll be able to offer a child what he or she needs before issues start.

4. Master the art of distraction

If you see a toddler or preschooler on the verge of losing self-regulation or experiencing a behavior difficulty, you can step in and try to redirect them with a book or a toy. Directing a child's attention away from the negative emotions can help them calm down before an issue begins. Even something as simple as asking how the child is feeling can divert the difficult situation.

What to do DURING a self-regulation difficulty... The time will inevitably come when an outburst ensues. How should you react when this occurs?

5. Keep everyone safe

Some children exhibit physical behaviors such as dropping to the floor, hitting, or throwing objects during frustrating time, so your first job is to keep all of the children safe. Prevent accidents by moving objects that might cause harm (i.e., sharp corners or hard edges) and encourage the other children to work on a quiet activity like reading or drawing in nearby area of the classroom.

6. Keep your cool

It is important for the adults in the area to remain calm. To help a child self-regulate, adults must first be regulated themselves. Remember, the child's behavior is not directed at the adults, though it might sometimes seem that it is. Remember that episodes during which young children become frustrated or angry and respond by acting out in some way are typical and their behavior is to be expected. These acting-out behaviors help children to work through their feelings and release stress and anxiety.

7. Provide a calm space

When children are overstimulated or frustrated, providing a calm place away from the situation can give them space to work through their feelings without becoming even more upset. Having a quiet space gives children a sense of control and a place to disengage from whatever triggered the feelings to begin with. Designate a calm area that children know they can visit if needed and teach the use of the calming area.

8. Talk through it

When children are upset, it helps to talk through their problems with an adult in the classroom. To be an active listener, get down on their level and quietly let them know that you understand how they are feeling. You should respond when they talk to you, but don't attempt to force a reply. Your most important role is listening.

What to do AFTER a behavior difficulty ... After a behavior episode disrupts the flow of your day, how do you get the child and the class back on track?

9. Don't ignore that the behaviors occurred

It is important to talk with children regularly about emotions and good ways to handle issues that come up when they are upset. It is important to remember that the follow-up conversation should focus on problem-solving and calming strategies and not focus on blame or "bad choices".

10. Encourage empathy

Children need to understand that their friends may have trouble with certain things, like sharing or moving from one activity to another. Having regular, honest conversations about feelings will help students understand how they and their friends feel and learn to be kind and helpful, as well as learn to understand how to regulate their own actions when they are angry or frustrated.

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