Supporting self-regulation

This is an introduction to self-regulation for school staff. These information slides are part of a series of introductory information presentations about working with educational psychologists and common aspects of special educational needs which the EPS supports schools across Oxfordshire with.

This presentation is designed as a starting point for school staff to find out more about self-regulation for children and young people.

We thought it might be helpful to start with some definitions:

Emotional regulation refers to the ability to maintain a state of calmness, focus and alertness. When we are emotionally regulated, we are able to process information, think clearly, interact well with others and engage in learning.

On the other hand, emotional dysregulation refers to instances when we are unable to maintain this state of calmness or alertness. In children, emotional dysregulation can be viewed through a number of behaviours, such as externalising behaviours or fight or flight responses, but can also be shown through internalising behaviours or freeze responses, whereby the pupil becomes more withdrawn or passive. Emotional dysregulation arises from experiencing stress beyond one’s ability to cope.

Self-regulation refers to the ability to recognise our emotions, manage and respond appropriately to our emotions across different situations. It requires us to be able to implement strategies that can help us to return to a calm and regulated state. Self-regulation is different to self-control. Self-control is about inhibiting strong impulses whereas self-regulation is about reducing the frequency and intensity of strong impulses by managing stress and improving our ability to recover.

It is a major task for some children and young people to regulate their feelings and behaviour consistently. Learning to self-regulate begins at birth and continues through-out our lives.

Finally, we’ve got co-regulation which is a joint act of returning to a regulated state after experiencing a strong emotion. As learning to self-regulate takes time and practice, a key part of supporting children to be able to do this is to effectively co-regulate their emotions with them.

Now that we have a shared understanding of what self-regulation is, it is helpful to think about why this might be important for children and young people we work with. Self-regulation is important to all of us because it impacts all of our lives including social, emotional, behavioural, and cognitive aspects. For example, self-regulation links to positive relationships, management of stress and emotions, engagement with learning (e.g. attention and motivation), alignment of behaviour to personal values and goals, self-confidence and self-esteem. Studies found positive self-control links to wellbeing, resilience to stress and increased happiness.

Children's learning, and their ability to self-regulate are best understood developmentally, and there are a number of factors that can influence the development of a child or young person’s self-regulation skills. These can include adverse childhood experiences such as witnessing domestic violence, being a young carer or experience of prejudice and discrimination.

Early attachment experiences – having a secure attachment with a caregiver ensures that emotional needs are responded to consistently and sensitively which helps children to develop their self-regulation skills.

Individual differences in how and the rate at which children learn and develop skills – as we know, self-regulation skills continue to develop throughout childhood, adolescence and right into early adulthood.

Environmental factors can impact the development of these skills, such as how adults around the child or young person have modelled self-regulation but also the influence of peer groups.

Special educational needs, so pupils with additional learning needs or those who are neurodiverse may find it more tricky to learn to self-regulate and therefore require additional adult support to learn these skills.

In responding to dysregulated behaviour we need to ensure that our interactions are developmentally matched to where the learners ‘is’ and not where we think they should be based on their chronological age.

Now that we have identified aspects that influence the development of self-regulation in children and young people, we are going to consider how the skill of self-regulation is developed. The steps outlined on the slide were developed by Stuart Shanker to explain the ‘typical development’ of self-regulation. This includes being able to identify stressors in our environment and reduce them, having self-awareness over our emotional responses and knowing how to calm and regulate our emotions.

Shanker also outlined an expanded model of these steps, which is relevant to children who may find self-regulation a difficult skill to develop, perhaps due to some of the factors already identified. This model included 5 steps.

Firstly, being helped to feel safe and secure.

Secondly, being aware and able to express emotions.

Thirdly. being able to identify and reduce stressors.

Fourth, being aware of what it feels like to be calm.

And five, discovering how to calm. As the adult supporting children and young people, we can then begin to use these models to think about how we can develop those skills.

The first key skill in being able to self-regulate is being able to identify stressors or factors that may cause us to feel strong emotions. As adults working with children and young people who are dysregulated, often what we see (in terms of their behaviour) is not the ‘full picture’ and it’s our role to try to be ‘stress detectives’ and identify what the young person might be feeling or what might be causing them to feel dysregulated, and eventually help them to learn to do this more independently.

This diagram by Juliette Young, shows some of the factors that may contribute to emotionally dysregulated behaviours that we might want to consider, and includes factors such as:

* Sensory issues
* The Social environment that the child is in, as well as the physical environment
* Psychological factors such as safety, sense of belonging, ..
* Learning factors such as readiness to learn and their need for support with academic learning.
* Family & community factors that might also impact how the young person is feeling.

Another aspect of the development of self-regulation is self-awareness. This includes awareness of thoughts, emotions and the physiological responses in our bodies that we experience when different thoughts and feelings occur. As adults supporting children and young people to develop self-awareness, we need to identify the child’s strengths or difficulties within these areas. For example, a child may be aware of their thoughts but struggle to recognise the physiological response they feel in their body. We can then support them as needed to develop their awareness. It is important for self-awareness to build a picture of the children and young peoples’ experience over time and in different contexts as we know from our own experience that we experience stressors very differently at different times and in different environments.

The slide gives some examples of different activities related to these three skills which can be used with children and young people to explore their experience. As well as exploring self-awareness in a calm, reflective space, it is important for adults to support children’s self-awareness in the moment. We can do things like provide examples and model, and wonder with the children and young people about their experience, as well as them being a self-regulating influence. Approaches such as Emotion Coaching and PACE can be helpful with this and your school’s link EP as well as other Local authority services can provide further guidance and training on these approaches if they are of interest. Staff in school such as ELSAs may also be supportive for children and young people who need additional help to develop the skill of self-awareness.

Finally, being able to self-regulate involves being able to use a range of strategies to help manage strong emotions and be able to return to a more regulated state.

When working with children and young people, we can’t expect them to know all of these strategies or to use them independently or even consistently, so the first step is for us to co-regulate and practice these skills with them.

Some of the strategies that can be used to help when feeling dysregulated include ensuring that within school the child has a safe or calm space they can use if they need some time out, we could teach the use of breathing, relaxation and mindfulness strategies with the young person when they are calm and regulated and help them become more familiar with these tools so that they can use them more easily when they are feeling dysregulated. Other ideas include helping them to engage with positive self-talk or challenge unhelpful thinking patterns, helping them by talking things through to problem solve and encouraging them to advocate for their own needs. As we are all different, not all of these strategies will work for everyone, so it’s also about helping the young person learn what helps them best and helping them to build their own ‘emotional toolkit’ of strategies that they can use when needed.

Further information including information related to a range of other areas of need can be found on Schools News and the Educational Psychology Service website. There are also several useful websites which contain information and resources specifically about self-regulation which you may wish to check out following watching this video. They include:

* The educational psychology service hub self-regulation page
* The Beacon house website
* ELSA support website
* An Information sheet on self-regulation from Education Scotland

The links for these are included on this slide.

Thank you for listening to this presentation on self-regulation, we hope that it has given you some ideas of how you can support the development of these skills in the children and young people that you work with.