

Supporting Your Child Through Big Emotions: A Simple Guide to Co-Regulation

Children experience different emotional states. As parents and carers, we can help them feel safe and supported by responding in ways that meet their emotional needs in the moment. This is called **co-regulation**—it means we help children manage their feelings by staying calm, connected, and supportive.

How you can respond

1. Calm & Connected State

- Calm and steady
- Open to talking and listening
- Interested in playing or learning

Be playful, warm, and engaging
Use your voice, facial expressions and body language to connect
Encourage conversation and imagination
Play games that challenge their thinking in a fun way

2. Mild Stress or Early Upset

- Slightly anxious, frustrated, or fidgety
- Easily distracted or needing more attention
- Starting to feel out of control

Make eye contact and show interest with your face and voice
Stay calm and kind in how you speak
Match their energy gently—be more animated if they're agitated, quieter if they're sad
Acknowledge their feelings: "It looks like you're feeling a bit upset—I'm here."
Offer calming activities like a walk, sensory play, or quiet time

3. High Stress or Dysregulation (Fight/Flight Mode)

- Very upset or overwhelmed
- May shout, run around, be defiant or unsafe
- Finding it hard to listen or calm down

Keep yourself calm—your calm helps them feel safe
Stay close, but reduce pressure to talk
Speak quietly and clearly with short phrases, not questions
Let them know you're in control and they're not alone
Try soothing techniques: gentle movements, low lighting, less noise

4. Shut Down or Freeze (Low Energy State)

- Withdrawn, silent, or not responding
- May seem sad, tired, or "zoned out"
- Might not want to be touched or talked

Approach gently and let them know you're there
Use a soft, comforting tone
Try calming things like soft music, humming, or gentle touch (if they're okay with it)
Give them time and space to feel safe again

5. Crisis (Unsafe Behaviour when safety is at risk (the child or others):

- It's important to have a clear, agreed plan in place
- This plan should include what helps your child, what actions adults will take, and how to keep everyone safe
- The child should be part of making this plan, when possible
- All adults involved with the child should understand and follow the same approach
- Adults staying calm helps the child feel secure and return to a safer emotional state

Remember:

Your presence, calmness, and understanding are powerful. When you respond in ways that match how your child is feeling, you help them feel safe and learn to manage their emotions over time.

How your child might be feeling