Helpful statements and activities to support children through moments of dysregulation

Children may experience moments of dysregulation when they feel overwhelmed, upset, distressed or overstimulated. The following statements and practical activities can help educators provide calm, responsive and supportive care.

Helpful statements to support children through moments of dysregulation



Staying calm

- "I'm here with you."
- "You're safe."
- "I'm going to stay with you while we work this out together."
- "Let's take a moment together."
- "Would you like me to sit nearby, or would you prefer some space?"



Acknowledge and validating feelings

- "I can see you're feeling upset."
- "That looks really frustrating."
- "It's okay to feel angry, sad or disappointed."
- "I understand. That was important to you."
- "I can see it's hard for you to stop playing right now."



Helping children name emotions

- "It looks like you might be feeling frustrated."
- "Are you feeling sad because that didn't work?"
- "Your body looks like it's telling me you might be feeling angry."
- "You really wanted to win that game. That feeling is called disappointment."



Helping children feel safe and supported

- "Let's take some slow breaths together."
- "Would you like to sit with me or have some space?"
- "We can slow our bodies down together."
- "I'll help you until you feel calm again."
- "Let's think about some things that help you feel calm."
- "I know you love colouring, drawing or kicking a ball. How about we try doing that together?"

Adelaide University | Australian Centre for Child Protection

A national Child Safety Reform initiative

Helpful statements to support children through moments of dysregulation

Being curious about the child' needs

- "I wonder what is making this feel so hard right now."
- "I wonder what you might be feeling right now."
- "What do you notice in your body right now?"
- "Can you show me what you need?"
- "What were you trying to do before you started feeling this way?"
- "Let's work out what might help."

Emotional coaching and problem-solving

- "I can see you're upset. Let's work out what we can do."
- "It's okay to feel angry, but we need to keep everyone safe. What can we do instead?"
- "I can see that was really hard for you. Next time, you could try..."
- "Let's think of a way to solve this together."
- "What would you tell a friend to do if they were feeling this way?"
- "What has worked for you before when you have felt this way?"

Helpful activities to support children through moments of dysregulation

Get to know each child

- Recognise that each child is different and what helps one child feel calm may not work for another.
- Recognise when children may need support to become calmer, more alert, or more engaged, and adapt strategies.
- Notice children's triggers, early signs of distress, sensory preferences (e.g. movement, touch, noise), and the strategies that help them remain calm and regulated.
- Talk with families about routines, preferences, and strategies that work at home.
- Offer children choice and opportunities to try different strategies.

Use music, rhythm, and movement to support regulation

- Incorporate familiar songs, lullabies, calming background music, and gentle use of musical instruments.
- Use rhythm activities such as clapping, tapping, and action rhymes with slow, repetitive movements.
- Encourage gentle movement experiences, including stretching, swaying, rocking, and following simple movement patterns or routines.

Adelaide University | Australian Centre for Child Protection

A national Child Safety Reform initiative

Helpful activities to support children through moments of dysregulation



Offer sensory supports

- Use sensory and movement experiences to support both calming and alertness, depending on children's individual regulation needs.
- Offer sensory play experiences such as playdough, clay, sand, water, and exploring a variety of textures (soft, rough, smooth).
- Provide sensory tools and calming resources, including fidget toys, stress balls, textured objects, wobble cushions, bubble tubes, liquid timers, and scented materials (e.g. lavender playdough).
- Incorporate activities that provide deep pressure and heavy work, such as pushing, pulling, carrying, or using a weighted blanket or teddy.



Create calm and safe spaces

- Provide comfortable, quiet spaces where children can take a break, relax, and regulate their emotions.
- Use calming features such as soft lighting, tents, rugs, cushions, blankets, soft toys, familiar objects, and calming visuals.
- Make calming and sensory resources easily accessible, including sensory items, comfort objects, and noise-reducing options such as headphones.
- Create inviting, uncluttered environments that minimise noise and support children's choice and independence in accessing the space when needed.



Support regulation through breathing exercises

- Model and practise slow, controlled breathing with children. “Let’s take slow breaths together”.
- Use imaginative breathing activities such as blowing out birthday candles, smelling a flower, or blowing bubbles and feathers.
- Encourage children to connect breathing with body awareness by noticing their tummy rise and fall, placing hands on their belly, or watching an object move with their breath.
- Combine breathing with calming strategies such as counting, tracing shapes, following visual movements, and gently tensing and relaxing muscles.

Helpful activities to support children through moments of dysregulation



Encourage movement and outdoor play

- Provide regular opportunities for outdoor and active play.
- Create safe spaces for children to run, jump, climb, balance, stretch, and engage in whole-body movement.
- Incorporate movement experiences such as obstacle courses, movement games, and regular movement breaks throughout the day.
- Offer sensory and physical activities that support regulation and motor development, such as swinging, digging in sand, or other active outdoor experiences.



Teach simple calming strategies

- Use grounding activities that focus on the senses, such as “Tell me three things you can see that are red”, “tell me two things you can hear”, “tell me something you can smell”.
- Encourage slow breathing, counting, and body awareness to promote calm and help children reconnect with the present moment.
- Guide children to notice physical sensations, such as “What does the chair feel like underneath you?” or “Can you feel your feet on the floor?”
- Introduce simple mindfulness, movement, or yoga activities that support relaxation and self-regulation.



Support children to develop their emotional awareness and ability to name emotions

- Use books, pictures, mirrors, puppets, role play, and visual supports such as emotion charts, posters, and cards to explore and discuss emotions.
- Teach simple emotion words (e.g., happy, sad, angry, frustrated) and encourage children to identify and label their feelings, for example by pointing to pictures or describing how they feel.
- Modell emotional language by talking about your own feelings, physical sensations, and needs, such as: “I feel frustrated when…” or “When I’m excited, my body feels wiggly and I like to jump up and down.”
- Help children recognise connections between feelings, physical sensations, and appropriate ways to respond or regulate emotions.
- Encourage children to express and reflect on their feelings through drawing, conversation, and other creative experiences.