

A large, stylized green graphic on the right side of the page. It features a flower-like shape at the top with several petals, and a long, curved leaf or stem extending downwards and to the left. The graphic is composed of solid green shapes.

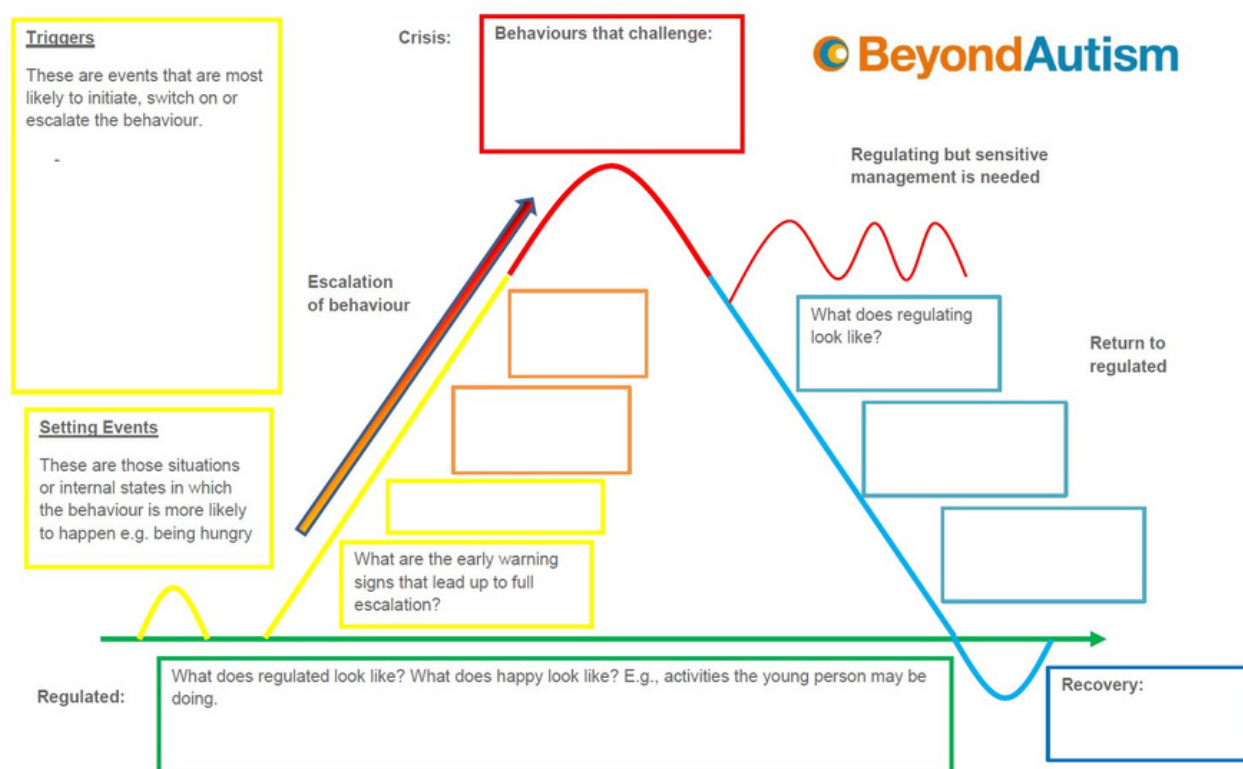
Supporting the Development of Self-regulation Skills in the Early Years

Simple strategies for
educators to model and
teach to enable young
children to develop an
awareness of their own
feelings and how to manage
them.

EYCC January 2026

How to use this resource

Self-regulation is a foundational skill in early childhood that enables children to manage their emotions, behaviour, and attention in ways that support learning, relationships, and wellbeing. Developing self-regulation helps children cope with challenges, build resilience, and engage positively with others. In early years settings, educators play a vital role in nurturing these skills through consistent, responsive, and developmentally appropriate strategies. This resource offers a range of practical evidence-based approaches, colour-coded in line with the escalation curve (below) —from calm and preventative strategies through to de-escalation and recovery techniques—empowering educators to respond effectively to children's needs at every stage of emotional arousal. The mauve first section is a guide for your ordinarily available provision. Ordinarily available provision is the inclusive, high-quality teaching and everyday adjustments that settings are expected to provide for all children. This resource is designed for you to display your focus strategies to remind staff of useful ways to support children in their early years practice. These can also be shared with parents and carers.



This section: **Ordinarily available provision**

Children develop the ability to manage their emotions through the development of healthy brain architecture. This requires secure attachments, connection and consistent nurture. Strategies include:



Be aware of your own emotional state

What physical sensations are you experiencing? How are you feeling?

In order to support children's development of self-regulation, we must be emotionally aware ourselves. Children require our calm. Make time each morning for an emotional check-in with colleagues.

Develop awareness of your own emotional state, triggers and responses.



Positive connections

Notice the child as soon as they arrive:

Greet them warmly at their level

Offer physical closeness

Make a positive connection.

Setting a positive tone for the day, ensuring children feel seen and heard, creates a sense of belonging and meets children's emotional needs.

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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Meeting basic needs

Consider whether physiological needs have been met: provide food, water/milk, sleep, warmth, movement or closeness to meet those needs.



Co-regulate

Help children manage emotions through your calm presence, modelling, reassurance, and responsive interactions. Keep your voice slow and low. Breathe deeply. Provide rhythmic support through rocking, patting and singing.

Children develop the ability to manage their emotions through the development of healthy brain architecture. This requires secure attachments, connection and consistent nurture.

Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Serve and return

Back and forth responsive and attuned exchanges build healthy brain architecture.

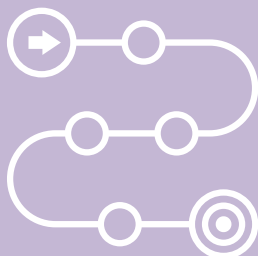


Developmentally appropriate expectations

Think: does the child have these skills yet?
Provide support and scaffold the development of new skills in manageable chunks.
Make adaptations to include all children eg. hand gestures, visuals.

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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Prepare for what is ahead

Show pictures of what is going to happen. Warn of any change. Use social stories to break down complex situations into manageable chunks.



Activate the thinking brain

Calmness and connection provide safety, lower stress and anxiety and enable thinking and learning to take place. Raising stress and anxiety triggers the fight/flight response and behaviours that challenge.

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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Safe Space

Provide a comfortable, nurturing space with minimal stimulation, where the child feels safe and secure that they can retreat to when feeling overwhelmed.



Belonging

Support children's sense of security and belonging by displaying family photographs at child height and creating books about them, their families and their favourite things. Ensure your setting reflects your families.

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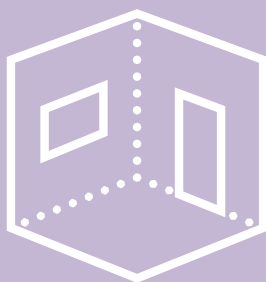


Wonder aloud

Say out loud what the child might be feeling based on what you observe.

'I can see tears in your eyes, I wonder if you're feeling sad'.

See Louise Bomber's work: <https://scottishattachmentinaction.org/wondering-aloud/>



Environmental impact

Look at the environment from a child's perspective:

Is it calm and well-organised?

Is there appropriate level of stimulation?

Is the noise level appropriate? Is it too bright?

Are expectations developmentally appropriate?

Make sure children are not over-stimulated or overwhelmed by bright lights and colours while ensuring the activities provide an appropriate level of challenge that fascinate and engage the children.

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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Sensory soothing

Provide experiences within your continuous provision that soothe the senses:

Playdough and gloop

Treasure baskets

Sensory and calm boxes

Cosy area with weighted blanket and cushions

Black-out tent or safe space with minimal stimulation



Adopt the PACE approach

Playfulness in interactions promotes connection and reduces stress

Acceptance of needs and emotions that drive behaviour

Curiosity about where the behaviour has come from

Empathy and compassion with the child and their feelings

PACE is an approach developed by Dr Dan Hughes

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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Emotion coaching

Wonder aloud: 'I wonder if you're feeling ... because'

Validate the feeling: 'I would feel... if that happened to me'

Set boundaries: 'It's OK to feel....It's not OK to hurt/break'

Find a solution: 'I can help you think of a different way to cope with big feelings'



Describe and name feelings

Talk about our physical responses to emotions: how do they feel in our bodies?

'My heart is fast and my muscles feel tense'

Name the feeling:

'I think I am feeling angry'

This enables children to identify and name their own emotions.

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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Notice calmness

Bring an awareness to the state of calm.

Talk about how your body feels:

'My muscles feel soft, my heart is slow, my mind is resting, I feel calm'

Recognise this is a positive feeling: 'I like feeling calm'.

Support children to feel their own heart rate then notice and enjoy their own calm. Practise using calm boxes during calm times.



Commentary

Narrate children's play and actions. This helps them to feel noticed and supports communication and language as well.

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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Schema

Notice children's preferred patterns of learning and meet that need e.g. if they need to throw, create opportunities for throwing activities within the provision.



Choice

Enable children to be active agents in their own learning.

Giving choice also supports language development: 'would you like to play with blocks or the play dough?'

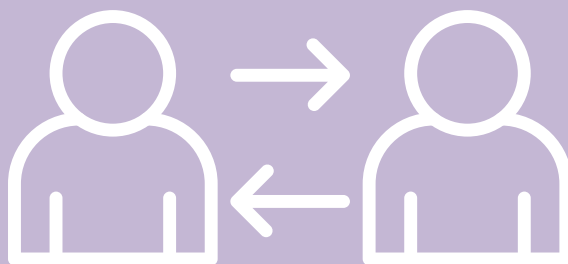
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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Model social communication

Display positive non-verbal communication; promote waiting, joint attention and engagement; and demonstrate rules of communication at all times.

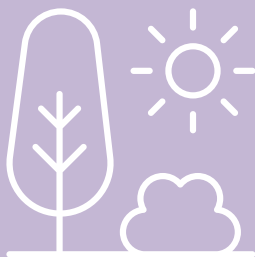


Relationship skills

Talk about the impact of words and actions on others. Support when and how to ask for help. Support conflict resolution by acknowledging the reasons for behaviour and finding a solution together.

Children develop the ability to manage their emotions through the development of healthy brain architecture. This requires secure attachments, connection and consistent nurture.

Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Go outdoors

Outdoor play reduces stress, builds resilience, boosts focus, and strengthens emotional regulation through free movement.



Get down to child eye level

Being face to face at children's level builds trust, reduces anxiety, provides a positive connection and encourages positive behaviour. It also strengthens communication skills.

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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



First... then...

Use language that states clearly your expectations, with a motivating activity to follow.



Understand the child

Remember all behaviour is communication. Knowing the child, their family and their experiences will support your professional curiosity. Home visits can support this.

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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Nourish the need to be noticed

Comment: 'Smart haircut!'

Hold in mind: 'I thought of you when...'

Praise explicitly: 'I love the way you...'



Regulating routines

Structure and predictable routines create safety.

Display and follow a visual timetable.

Sing a morning greeting song or make up songs for the things we do throughout the day to create belonging and consistency through rhythm.

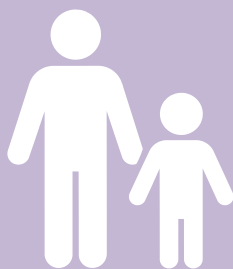
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Ways to embed this in your practice include:



How does it feel?

Encourage children to reflect on how they feel when they have made positive choices.



See the good

See children for what they CAN do, rather than what they cannot. Comment on what you see. If mistakes are made, give the message that this is how we learn and mistakes are learning opportunities. 'I can't do it **yet**'.

Children develop the ability to manage their emotions through the development of healthy brain architecture. This requires secure attachments, connection and consistent nurture.

Ways to embed this in your practice include:



Connect

We are all connection seeking.
Give connection for the behaviours we want to see. This can be a simple smile or thumbs up, or explicit praise.
Do this early and often.



Praise explicitly

Describe the behaviour so that the child knows explicitly what you want to see:
'I love the way you put your arm around your friend when they were sad'
What does it show? **'It shows me how kind you are'**.
See Howard Glasser: Nurtured Heart Approach

The following activities will calm the child, keep them regulated and enable them to function in their thinking brain (the prefrontal cortex).

Our aim is to maintain this state **(the green phase)**.

Some activities we can do to maintain this include:



Movement activity:

Marching on the spot

Running

Star jumps

Balancing on one leg

Copy me



Connection with nature

Notice the weather and how it feels on our skin.
Notice the blue sky through the branches of the tree. Listen to the rustling of the leaves as you kick them in the air; and how they float down.

The following activities will calm the child, keep them regulated and enable them to function in their thinking brain (the prefrontal cortex).

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Some activities we can do to maintain this include:



Imaginative Movement

Pretend to be:

Popping corn, straight spaghetti, cooked spaghetti, jelly bean, jumping bean, chilli bean, baked bean, string bean, broad bean



Rhythmic activity

Clapping, tapping, singing, stamping, dancing, skipping.

Any rhythmic movement is regulating and calms the nervous system

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Some activities we can do to maintain this include:



Mindfulness

Yoga, meditation and mindful activities support regulation. Focus on breath, body and sound.



Eye spy

What can you see that is blue?

Beginning with s?

That is tall?

That has wheels?

Drawing attention to what is around in the moment helps create a state of calm

The following activities will calm the child, keep them regulated and enable them to function in their thinking brain (the prefrontal cortex).

Our aim is to maintain this state **(the green phase)**.

Some activities we can do to maintain this include:



Move and stop

Jump and jump and jump and stop

Jump and jump and jump and stop

Jump and jump and jump and stop

Now we'll jump some more!

(change the action and repeat)



Cause and effect activities

Provide simple, repetitive activities that are predictable and safe so that children can enjoy the satisfaction and pride of independent success.

The following activities will calm the child, keep them regulated and enable them to function in their thinking brain (the prefrontal cortex).

Our aim is to maintain this state **(the green phase)**.

Some activities we can do to maintain this include:



Singing

Singing is rhythmic and has the added benefit of developing speech and language skills. The change in tone of voice is calming.

Children who know eight nursery rhymes by the age of four years have improved reading outcomes and life chances.

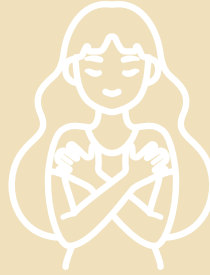


Visualisation

Close your eyes. Imagine you are lying on a warm, sandy beach. Feel the soft sand beneath your body. Feel the warm sun on your skin. Feel the cool water on your toes. Hear the sea swishing on the sand.

(Create different scenarios in line with children's interests)

In the **amber phase**, the child has perceived a threat and they are beginning to become dysregulated. Notice and respond swiftly to support their return to the **green phase**. Activities to support that include:



Butterfly hug

Cross your arms across your front with your hands on your opposite shoulders. Breathe in and out. Pretend your hands are butterfly wings and flap them against your shoulders.



Water

Drinking, washing, bathing, playing with, watching or listening to water soothes the senses. Notice what you sense and talk about it.

In the **amber phase**, the child has perceived a threat and they are beginning to become dysregulated. Notice and respond to support their return to the **green phase**. Activities to support that include:



Drink through a straw

Drink milk or water through a straw: this slows breathing and creates a sense of calm.



Breathing

Breathe deeply and loudly and encourage the child to breathe with you. Try:

- Square, star or rainbow breathing
- Blowing out candles on a cake
- Blowing to cool hot chocolate
- Tracing around your fingers (mountain breathing).

In the **amber phase**, the child has perceived a threat and they are beginning to become dysregulated. Notice and respond to support their return to the **green phase**. Activities to support that include:



Heavy work

Provide opportunities to carry and lift heavy objects.



Feelings in the mirror

Provide a full length mirror with dinosaur feet on the floor. Stomp and roar in the mirror when big feelings are bubbling.

In the **amber phase**, the child has perceived a threat and they are beginning to become dysregulated. Notice and respond to support their return to the **green phase**. Activities to support that include:



Cuddle yourself

Cross your arms around your body and squeeze yourself tightly.



Colour counting

How many green things can you see?
How many blue?

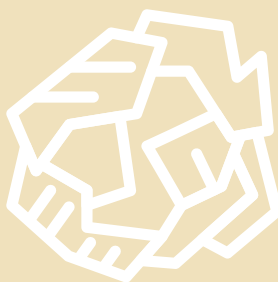
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Playdough

Squash and squeeze any tactile malleable material.

Having playdough in your continuous provision ensures children can access this self-regulation support at any time.



Popping, tearing, scrunching

Pop bubble wrap, tear paper or scrunch paper into balls.

In the **amber phase**, the child has perceived a threat and they are beginning to become dysregulated. Notice and respond to support their return to the **green phase**. Activities to support that include:



Animal acting

Can you crawl like a caterpillar?

Can you wiggle like a worm?

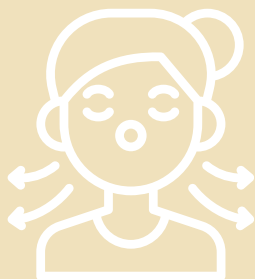
Can you roar like a lion?



Muscle tensing

Tighten the muscles in your shoulders and then relax. Repeat, moving around other parts of the body.

In the **amber phase**, the child has perceived a threat and they are beginning to become dysregulated. Notice and respond to support their return to the **green phase**. Activities to support that include:



Humming

Close your eyes and 'mmm'
Humming produces vibrations that ripple through the body, stimulating the vagus nerve and creating calm.



5-4-3-2-1 grounding

Look for 5 things you can see.
Listen for 4 things you can hear.
Feel 3 things you can touch.
Notice 2 things you can smell and 1 thing you can taste/ wonder/ like.

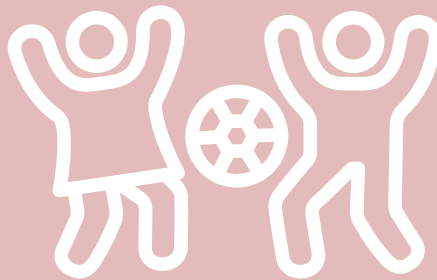
In the **red phase**, the child's prefrontal cortex is now off line and they are in 'survival mode'. They will not be able to reason and will have the need to fight, flee or freeze. Responses to support children at this stage include:



Calmness

Meet their chaos with your calm.

Mirror neurons are activated in the child to join you in your calm.



Get outdoors

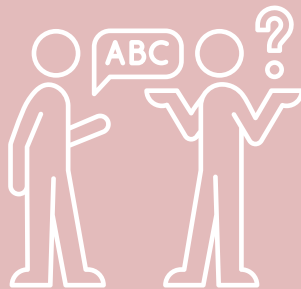
Allow to run, move and feel free outside.

In the **red phase**, the child's prefrontal cortex is now off line and they are in 'survival mode'. They will not be able to reason and will have the need to fight, flee or freeze. Responses to support children at this stage include:



Silence

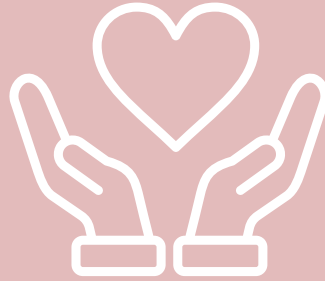
Reduce words and stay with silence.



Planned ignoring

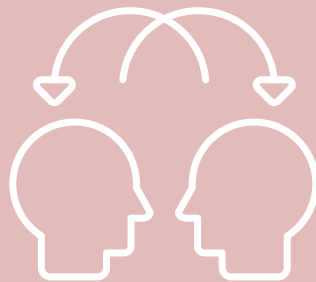
If behaviours are not unsafe, do not give a connection or attention. Give an immediate connection for desirable, pro-social behaviours.

In the **red phase**, the child's prefrontal cortex is now off line and they are in 'survival mode'. They will not be able to reason and will have the need to fight, flee or freeze. Responses to support children at this stage include:



Be empathetic

'I hear you'
'I am here with you'.



Change of adult

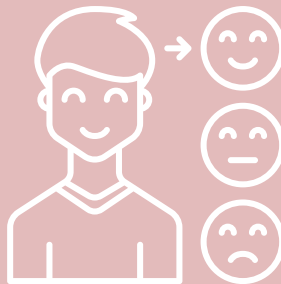
Notice your own level of stress: if it is high,
change over with another adult.

In the **red phase**, the child's prefrontal cortex is now off line and they are in 'survival mode'. They will not be able to reason and will have the need to fight, flee or freeze. Responses to support children at this stage include:



Tone of voice

Keep your voice low and calm with minimal words.

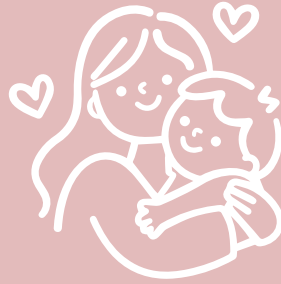


Be aware of your facial expression

Avoid frowning or stressed expressions. These are what the child will perceive first.

Reduce the perception of threat.

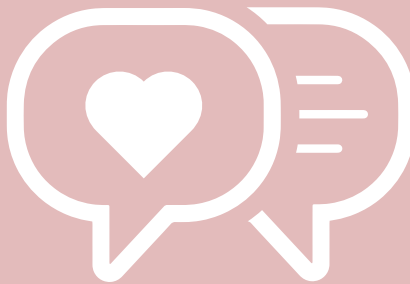
In the **red phase**, the child's prefrontal cortex is now off line and they are in 'survival mode'. They will not be able to reason and will have the need to fight, flee or freeze. Responses to support children at this stage include:



Keep body language open

Avoid crossing arms or standing over a child.
Get down to their level.

Reduce the perception of threat.



Validate feelings

I wonder if you're feeling...
It's OK to feel...

After a crisis, it can take many hours, or even days, for a child to return to the **green** phase. The following stages will support this:



1. Regulate

Use the soothing strategies to support the child to return to a regulated state.



2. Relate

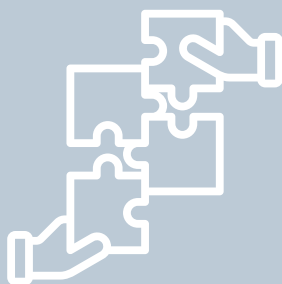
Connect with the child and let them know that you are there for them. Your relationship is what will make them feel safe and move out of 'survival' mode.

After a crisis, it can take many hours, or even days, for a child to return to the **green** phase. The following stages will support this:



3. Reason

What happened?
What were you feeling?
Who has been affected?
Do not blame or shame.



4. Restore

What needs to happen to put things right?
Support the child to find a way to repair.
This could be mending a toy or caring for a friend.