



ASK A SOCIAL WORKER

What are some good activities or ways to help a child have better emotional regulation? Any tips would be helpful. Thank you for what you do!

Helping children manage their emotions is something we teach from birth. Seeing their caregivers and others around them displaying appropriate emotional regulation skills allows them, through observational learning, to pick up on and model those behaviors. When adults are not great at emotional regulation, children learn this as well. There are two aspects of biology that complicate this however – genetics and prefrontal cortex development. Some children are genetically predisposed to have a more difficult time managing their emotions not matter what is modeled for or taught to them. On top of that, our prefrontal cortex is still developing into our 20s which means that children have the barriers of impulsivity and inattention in the way of emotional regulation, so it is not as easy for them to act with intention when they are feeling big emotions. When we mix that up with adoption, we are adding in varying developmental experiences, possible trauma, and unknown genetics which complicate things a bunch. But there are some great things we can do to assist our children in learning these valuable skills.

First, we want to make sure we are modeling appropriate emotional regulation skills. Since we are human, we cannot expect that anyone would be able to do this well 100% of the time. It can be very powerful for a child to hear from you when you have not demonstrated the best emotional regulation and to use this as an opportunity to discuss the experience with your children. This can look like – “I wanted to talk to you about earlier today when mom yelled at you. I was feeling very big feelings of frustration when that happened, and I did not do a good job of expressing my feelings. Did you know that just like you, even parents have big feelings, and we don’t always do our best when we feel big things? I wanted you to know I am sorry for yelling and that I am going to work hard on the choice I made to yell so I can try not to do that again.”

Second, we must give our children words to express their feelings. One of the most difficult things for children is when they are feeling something and cannot figure out what that feeling is. Feelings charts are a great tool to have on hand for your children. Another option is to assign colors to feelings – it might be helpful to connect red for instance with mad, green with worried, and blue with sad. If our child is having trouble finding the feelings words, he could say he is feeling “really really red” instead and it would give us an indication about what is going on. Along with teaching feelings words, we want to make sure children understand how to connect those feelings with the physical body sensations we have such as sweaty hands, a racing heart,

or butterflies in our stomach. If children can understand that when they start to feel mad their hands start to get sweaty and their stomach tenses up, they might become better able to know when they are beginning to feel maladaptive emotions and to communicate those emotions before they get out of control. Also, as parents, if we know those physical cues, we can lean into them – “Sam, I notice that you are clenching your fists and squinting your eyes. You sometimes do those things when you are starting to feel mad (or red) – how can I help you right now with that feeling?”

Finally, there are some great techniques that you can teach your children to help them deal with big feelings when they occur.



One final question... Are there any virtual (zoom, etc.) support groups for adoptive parents? It does not need to be with a social worker or trained professionals, but are there any virtual meetings of adoptive parents who want to chat and support each other? Thank you for your time!

We hope to bring this to The Park in 2022. While we have had parent support groups in the past, this is not something we offer currently. We have heard from parents how they wish they had a space to connect with others and we are hopeful to get something on the calendar very soon.