

# Seven Strategies to Help Early Learners Regulate Their Emotions

Teaching early elementary-age students has become much more demanding in recent years. Many state and district officials are pushing for academic rigor to begin as early as kindergarten. But at the same time, a growing number of children are entering formal education ill-prepared to manage their emotions, as evidenced by feedback from educators, including a recent national EdWeek Research Center survey.

Here are seven actionable strategies to use when young learners struggle to manage their emotions in the classroom.

## Integrate movement into the school day



Sitting still for even 30 minutes at a time can be challenging for young learners, and can subsequently lead to dysregulation. Finding ways to integrate movement throughout the school day can help keep students engaged and emotionally regulated. Here are some suggestions:

- Make movement a part of academic lessons (e.g. have students form the shape of letters with their bodies).
- Schedule a recess at the beginning of the school day so young learners release energy and focus better in the classroom.
- Set up the classroom in a way that requires students to move around occasionally.
- Avoid admonishing students who may move involuntarily; for instance, bouncing in their chair or standing behind their desk instead of sitting at it.

“I probably play six to 10 songs every day that tie in with what we’re doing, where the kids can get up and dance and sing.”

DAVID BUSKIRK

Kindergarten teacher at Beall Elementary School, Frostburg, Md.

## Use play to practice academic standards



Academic standards have accelerated in recent decades, especially in the younger grades. And while many early educators acknowledge that 5- and 6-year-olds are capable of a lot more than we once believed they were, how that learning is approached can mean the difference between eager

receptiveness and inattention or students acting out.

Adopting a play-based curriculum can help support young students engage in learning, and even meet state or district

academic standards. For instance, negotiating with classmates over who will create what, and how, during “center” time (think building blocks and paint easels) can help build language and problem-solving skills. Some states are catching on. In 2018, New Hampshire required kindergarten to be play-based.

“It’s been really cool to see the way I can address speaking and listening standards through opportunities to play.”

JESSICA ARROW

Kindergarten teacher at Symonds Elementary School, Keene, N.H.

“If you aren’t given a chance to think the way you think best, which is with your body and with your voice in play, you’re not going to think as well,” said Susan Engel, a psychologist and founding director of Williams College’s Program in Teaching.

## See school through the lens of your students



Students arrive at school with vastly different experiences in formal learning. Some have been with other children their age practically since birth, while others may be entering a peer group for the first time in kindergarten. Consider these differences and how they influence students’ emotions

and their ability to navigate the classroom setting.

“I always try to put myself in their shoes with what they’re going through, and I know that this is a big scary time for them.”

DAVID BUSKIRK

Kindergarten teacher at Beall Elementary School, Frostburg, Md.



## Use tangible tools to teach students to identify and regulate their emotions

Tangible tools exist to help students identify emotions that feel overwhelming, and to learn coping strategies to manage them.

- Chart-like devices called **mood meters** allow users to identify which of several feelings they may be experiencing in that moment.
- Further, **emotional-regulation wheels** let students spin a physical wheel (as in a board game) and choose an appropriate option for managing whatever feeling they're experiencing. Choices include strategies like, **"Sit by myself and do some breathing exercises,"** and **"Draw the experience."**

## Avoid responding in ways that could escalate the situation



How teachers respond to a student who's exhibiting a lack of emotional regulation can either escalate or de-escalate the situation. Using a "top-down" approach in an attempt to control the situation—for instance, by yelling at the child to **"calm down"** or **"pay attention"**—can have the opposite effect of

what's intended. Instead, allow the child the **space in which to de-escalate** his or her strong emotional response.

When the student has calmed down, suggest an appropriate strategy for coping with "big" feelings in the future; for instance:

- retreating to a calming corner,
- taking some deep breaths,
- or drawing a picture of what they're feeling.

## Create a calming corner



"Time-out" corners of yesterday were often intended to isolate and punish students. Today, these spaces tend to be called calming corners, and they're designed for that purpose. Asking students if they want to move into such a corner, rather than demanding it, gives them some sense of control over the situation when they may otherwise feel out of control. Similarly, allowing students some leverage (within reason) to decide when they feel ready to reengage with the class further promotes their sense of autonomy, and may make them more responsive to a teacher's efforts to then attempt to understand the "why" behind the lack of self-control.

## Forge partnerships with parents early

Approaching parents as partners, not adversaries, can improve **family engagement**. Research shows that strong family engagement can have lasting, positive effects on students' academic achievement, school engagement, and motivation. Establishing these positive parent relationships early, when the academic stakes are lowest, can reap long-term rewards throughout students' educational journey.

