

# Importance of emotion regulation for children



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Emotion regulation has been a highly controversial concept that has given rise to a vast amount of research. The literature has been inconsistent and confusing in providing a clear definition of such a complex construct.

However, the ability to regulate emotions has been increasingly recognized as an important early developmental milestone with significant implications for many areas of development (Manian & Bornstein, 2009). Learning how to regulate emotional responses and related behaviours in socially appropriate and adaptive ways is an essential component of children's successful development (Denham et al., 2003; Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Morris, 2002; Saarni, 1998). Children acquire those emotion regulation skills through an interaction among several internal and external factors which takes place over the life span (Calkins, 1994). The goal of this essay is to unpack the concept of emotion regulation in order to clarify its component processes.

### Sharpening the definition of emotion regulation

The term emotion regulation has been defined in various ways. The diverse definitions generally demonstrate two types of regulatory phenomena: emotion as regulating and emotion as regulated. Those focusing on the regulatory functions of emotions refer to changes that appear to result from the activated emotion, for example, if a child appears to the caregiver as being sad or upset then (s)he may change the way of disciplining the child at the moment. In contrast, advocates of the view that emotions are regulated emphasize the changes in the emotion that has been triggered. These including changes in intensity, or time course (Thompson, 1994) and may occur within the individual (e. g., reducing stress through self-soothing) or

between individuals (e. g., a child makes an unhappy parent smile) (Cole, Martin, & Denis, 2004).

It would be sensible at the beginning, to present some of the definitions stated by different researchers. According to Thompson (1994) emotion regulation « consists of the extrinsic and intrinsic processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, especially their intensive and temporal features, to accomplish one's goals» (p. 27-28).

Several dimensions of emotion regulation are included in this definition.

Firstly, it can involve maintaining and enhancing emotional arousal as well as inhibiting or subduing it. Secondly, it includes not only the acquired strategies of emotion self-control but also the variety of external influences that occur through the intervention of others. Thirdly, emotion regulation usually affects the intensive features of the emotion experienced by an individual rather than the activated emotion. Finally, according to Thompson, emotion regulation is functional, that is, in terms of the regulator's goals what the individual expects to gain from expressing the emotion in a particular situation (Thompson, 1994).

Gross (1998)'s definition of emotion regulation refers to « the processes by which individuals influence which emotions they have, when they have them and how they experience and express these emotions» (p. 275). This definition focuses on five different aspects of emotion regulation. A first point is that, individuals increase, maintain and decrease negative and positive emotions. Thus, emotion regulation can occur by preventing the activation of an emotion as well as by creating the circumstances that promote a different emotional experience – usually positive. Gross also states that there may be <https://assignbuster.com/importance-of-emotion-regulation-for-children/>

important differences in emotion regulatory processes across emotions while he makes no assumptions as to whether emotion regulation is good or bad. Moreover, his definition emphasizes emotion regulation in self while others (e. g. Thompson, 1994) include attempts to influence the emotions of others. A final aspect is that emotion regulatory processes may be automatic or controlled, conscious or unconscious, and may affect one or more points of the emotion generative process (Gross, 1998).

The diverse definitional approaches of emotion regulation within the literature are due to the fact that emotion regulation is a multifaceted concept. A clear identification of some key concepts concerning the construct of emotion regulation has been provided by Cole et al., (2004) in the article « Emotion Regulation as a Scientific Construct: Methodological Challenges and Directions for Child Development Research». As pointed out by Cole et al. (2004), an issue that complicates our understanding of emotion regulation is related to the fact that there is no clear differentiation among emotion and emotion regulation. One reason for that is the lack of general agreement among investigators about how to define emotion and emotion regulation. Additionally, the intensity of emotion is confounded with the regulatory processes of emotion. Another definitional issue is based on the confusion about whether the term emotion regulation is used only to describe optimal functioning or it also includes maladaptive emotion regulation (Cole, Michel, et al., 1994; Garber & Dodge, 1991; Keenan, 2000). That is, positive emotions are assumed to be « regulated» whereas negative emotions are assumed to be « unregulated». Finally, the fact that emotions

are flexible and complex emphasizes the need for multiple evidence to converge on the correct inferences in any study (Cole et al., 2004).

To sum up, one of the most complex issues in the literature of emotion regulation is to determine when emotion regulation is actually occurring, what is regulated and what behaviors can be considered as emotion-regulation strategies (Bridges, Denham, & Ganiban).

### The development of emotion regulation

There are undoubtedly multiple developmental pathways toward emotion regulation, deriving both from the efforts of external agents to manage the emotions of children and from the children's growing capacity to self-regulate (Thompson, 1994). The acquisition of emotion regulatory skills start to emerge early in life within a dynamic system between the children's innate neurobiology and the social environment (Goldsmith & Davidson, 2004; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Myers, & Robinson, 2007). With age and cognitive development, children become better able to manage emotions themselves.

The primary learning environment for the development of emotion regulation is considered to be the family context. One general basic assumption is that children internalize the strategies of their caregivers. As noted by Eisenberg (1998), the caregiver has a wide role to play in the development of the child's emotion regulation; initially, the infant is benefited in a state regulation through the provision of food, clothing, and physical soothing; later, the child is involved in more complex communications and interactions with the caregiver, through which (s)he learns to manage distress, control

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impulses, and delay gratification. During this extended process, the infant's sensorimotor capacities gradually mature to respond to different events and people. Caregivers soothe young children; they begin to learn what triggers certain emotions in the child and try to lessen the impact of certain situations by explaining to the child what is happening and avoiding situations that they believe their child will be upset by (Eisenberg, 1998). For example, if a child gets very frightened at the sight of a dog, then the caregiver might explain that some dogs are friendly. On the other hand, if their child is easily upset by loud noises then the caregiver might plan not to take him/her to a fireworks display.

An early study by Morris et al. (2007) supported that children's emotion regulation is affected by the family context in three important ways. Firstly, according to Parke (1994) children acquire emotion regulation skills by observing parents' emotional displays and interactions. Secondly, emotion regulation is affected by specific parenting practices and behaviours related to the socialization of emotion. And finally, the regulatory skills of children are affected by the emotional climate of the family through the styles of parenting, the family expressiveness and the emotional quality of the marital status. Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman (2002) supported that, family environments high in conflict and low in warmth set children at an increased risk for a variety of emotional and behavioural problems. In contrast, according to Fabes, Leonard, Kupanoff, & Martin (2001) warm and responsive parents seem to have well-regulated children.

In infancy and toddlerhood the progress of adaptive emotion regulation patterns is dependent on adequate and responsive social interactions (Cole, <https://assignbuster.com/importance-of-emotion-regulation-for-children/>

Michel, & Teti, 1994). As children become older, emotion regulation is influenced by growth in theory of mind (that is being able to recognize emotions in others and to be able to imagine how someone else feels), understanding their own emotions, and beginning to understand when and how it is appropriate or acceptable to express emotions according to the norms of the society in which they live (Thompson & Lagattuta, 2006). The maturation process enables children to develop greater capacity to modulate the direction of their emotional arousal and become better at distinguishing between stressors that can be controlled and those that cannot in order to choose the most effective coping solutions (Eisenberg, 1998).

A variety of biological processes contribute to those developmental acquisitions (Thompson, Lewis, & Calkins, 2008). Brain maturation and growing of various biological systems facilitate the understanding of other people's emotion, which in turn influences the knowledge about emotion situation contexts. Cognitive factors are also considered to play a major role in the transition toward greater emotion regulation (Cole et al., 1994). During preschool period children's social network is expanded to include new siblings, classroom and neighborhood peers and teachers. These social influences provide a variety of information about emotion, its regulatory influences, and its social acceptability (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994). As children enter early adolescence, peer groups become increasingly important and convey powerful signals for the regulation of emotions (Spinrad et al., 2006).

A general review of the child development literature reveals diverse studies that provide evidence that children initially acquire emotion regulation via <https://assignbuster.com/importance-of-emotion-regulation-for-children/>

their interaction with parents. These studies use laboratory procedures to assess the dyad by simulating ordinary challenges that young children face in their lives. In most cases, the procedures are designed to activate anger and frustration – for example, they stimulate a child’s desire for an activity or object and then block access to it. During those typical procedures, the young child is asked to clean up toys, to wait for mother to finish work to get a desirable object, to resist touching prohibited toys, or to persist at a difficult task. Such studies also include tasks that enhance positive emotional exchanges (e. g., snacks, free play, receiving the toy) (e. g., Cohn & Tronick, 1988; Field & Fogel, 1982; Tronick, 1989). Recently, Laible & Thompson’s (2002) study, suggested that mother – child conflict in the toddler years may be an important context for children’s socioemotional development. A prospective study that lasted 6 months involved sixty-three mother-toddler dyads and it examined how differences in the frequency and nature of early mother-toddler conflict are related to individual differences in children’s subsequent socioemotional development. However, causal interpretations from these data must be made with caution as the outcome assessments were taken at only one point in time. Also, the results of the study cannot be generalized as all the participants in the study were white, middle-class mothers and children.

To summarize, the studies mentioned so far on the dynamics of early parent – child emotional interactions provide evidence for the acquisition of emotion regulation by demonstrating reliable changes in the way mother and child express their emotions. During infancy and childhood, relationships and life experiences provide opportunities to experience emotions and acquire initial



strategies for modulating emotion experience and utilizing emotion successfully in contribution with children's maturational processes (Cole, Michel, & Teti, 1994).

The importance of emotion regulation for children's social development

Recently, the development of emotion regulation has been recognized as a central component of children's social competence. Diverse writings have provided strong evidence that children enlist emotion regulation skills to accomplish complex social and personal goals (Thompson, Lewis & Calkins, 2008). Regardless of where these skills are acquired, children who perceive and express emotion in acceptable ways are likely to have more positive relationships than others (Saarni et al., 1998).

In general, temperamental reactivity and negative affective tone have been associated with negative behaviours and behavioural problems in childhood (Barron & Earls, 1984; Bates, 1990; Kyrios & Prior, 1990) and adolescence (Caspi et al., 1994). Moreover, Stocker & Dunn (1990) provided evidence that intense, moody or emotionally negative children are less popular with peers than are other children. Furthermore, research evidence proposes that the regulatory skill of attention shifting sometimes is useful in children's coping with stress and frustration (Miller & Green, 1985), and seems to affect the ability to empathize and sympathize with others (Eisenberg, Fabes, Murphy et al., 1994). According to Denham et al., (1990), negative affect, especially anger, can be problematic in social interaction. It has been empirically proved that children rated more highly by teachers on dimensions such as friendliness and assertiveness, and lower on dimensions

such as aggressiveness and sadness are children who express and experience more positive than negative emotions. Such children also respond more prosocially to peers' emotions and are seen as more likable by their peers (Denham et al., 1990; Eisenberg, Fabes, Murphy et al., 1996).

Eisenberg and her colleagues (1995) examined the joint contributions of emotion regulation to normal children's socially appropriate behaviour at school, prosocial and sociable behaviour at school and problem behaviours at home. Their results revealed that aspects of both children's emotionality and regulation are associated with their social functioning, and that individual differences in these aspects of functioning are associated with long-term social outcomes. Hence, children who have not been able to regulate their emotions, who express their emotions very strongly thus exhibiting socially unacceptable behaviour may be particularly prone to behavioural and social problems. However, the results of this study cannot be generalized as the sample size was moderate and some of the findings were modest in strength. An additional study by Denham and her colleagues (2003) concluded that emotional knowledge and regulation predicts social competence in kindergarten- aged children. Finally, the still-face paradigm (Tronick, Als, Adamson, Wise, & Brazelton, 1978) provides strong evidence that emotion regulates social interaction through changes in the timing and sequencing of the dyadic interaction. In the typical three period procedure, mother and infant first engage in spontaneous interaction. Next, the mother is advised to show no emotional response for a short period, keeping her face neutral of expressions. In the end, the mother is instructed to regain her spontaneity. It is reliably demonstrated that changes in maternal emotional

state cause systematic changes in children's affect, thus offering another avenue for inferring emotion regulation (Cole et al., 2004).

Overall, the research evidence as well as the literature review seem to be ineffective in providing a clear answer to what emotion regulation is. For emotion regulation research to achieve its goals, future studies need to frame their efforts conceptually and use methods that provide compelling inferential evidence (Cole, Martin & Dennis, 2004). A good starting point would be for researchers to look at emotion and emotion regulation as well as their development from a very different point of view.

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