

## Strategies to support student emotional regulation

This document is intended to help teachers support students to regulate their emotions. The activities in the document can be used to support students' emotional regulation but are not 'formal' lessons *about* emotional regulation. The activities are organised by the key themes of [movement](#), [rhythm](#), [repetition](#), [laughter](#), [connection](#), [breathing](#), [resistance](#), and the [environment](#). These themes have been used as they are known to enhance wellbeing, reduce stress and anxiety, and improve memory and cognitive focus.

The following guiding principles underpin the activities in this document.

- **Proactive and preventative:** regulating activities are best used proactively to help students to maintain their calm. However, the activities can be used when a student or group of students need help to re-regulate. Whether used proactively or reactively, it is important to plan which strategies will be used, when, and for what purpose. It is also important that any strategies that are used reactively are taught and modelled in advance when students are in their calm state.
- **Frequent but quick:** regulating activities should be offered at regular times throughout the day and should be efficient. Frequent and short activities are typically more successful than infrequent but longer activities.
- **Support, not detract from, learning:** regulating activities can be incorporated into learning activities. Using regulating activities that are connected to and support the content being taught can help students to maintain their regulation while learning.
- **Responsive:** some activities are appropriate for students at specific stages of development. However, many of the other activities might be suitable across K–12. Use activities that meet the needs of your school and classroom and the needs and preferences of individual students.

Please note that links to non-department websites were not able to be included in this document. However, the activities and resources can be found using a search engine. For the rest of this document, where you see a strategy written in **bold text**, you can enter that text into a search engine to find out more information.

## Theme – Movement

### Theoretical underpinnings and evidence

Engaging in movement activities is an effective way to regulate our behaviour and emotions.

Physical movement not only promotes physical wellbeing but also enhances mental wellbeing by:

- increasing blood circulation around the body
- encouraging the distribution of hormones used to adjust our mood and level of alertness
- reducing levels of the body's stress hormones (for example, adrenaline and cortisol recruited for fight or flight response)
- stimulates the production of the 'feel good' hormones, such as endorphins (Vina et al. 2012).

Previously, movement activities were thought to provide students with a 'brain break'. However, research is now indicating that movement activities are 'brain boosters' rather than 'brain breaks' (Mavilidi 2022; McGowan 2023).

### Activities and resources

- Use movement during learning, not just during movement breaks. The following are examples of movement being used to support learning.
  - [Thinking While Moving](#)
  - [10@10 Energisers](#)
  - [Burn2 Learn](#)
  - **Graph dance**
  - **Tectonic plate dance**
  - **Kung fu punctuation**
- Use transitions into the classroom and between activities as opportunities for natural movement. For example, move from one area of the room to another using an **animal walk** or do **chair push-ups** or **chair dips** when changing activities.

- Use standing desks for computers/screen time, where possible.
- Mindfully walk between places around the school (for example, match the stride of person the beside you, find 3 things you've never noticed before, identify something you can smell, see, hear, feel).
- Do treasure hunts in the room.
- Play **Sensei Says** (Simon Says).
- Start the day/class with a dance, such as **Move-it Mob Style**.

## Theme – Rhythm

### Theoretical underpinnings and evidence

Music and movement are powerful tools to enhance children's self-regulation and academic achievement (Barrett et al. 2018; Jauset-Berrocal et al. 2018; Williams and Berthelsen 2019). Rhythmic activity uses neurological networks related to the perception of touch, pressure, temperature, position, movement, and vibration (Rashedi et al. 2021).

### Activities and resources

Ideas for rhythm include:

- drumming/percussion
- **desk and body percussion**
- marching routine
- tai Chi/martial arts/yoga routines
- **elastics routines** (for example, "Jingle jangle silver bangle, inside, outside, inside, on").

## Theme – Repetition

### Theoretical underpinnings and evidence

Patterned, repetitive experiences create feelings of predictability. When life is predictable, we know what to expect and who we can rely on. This security provides a calming foundation (Perry 2009).

### Activities and resources

Repetition comes in many forms. Ideas include:

- using consistent rituals for greeting and farewelling
- establishing and teaching consistent class routines
- keeping the room organised the same way
- origami
- building things and pulling them apart (for example, computer parts)
- bilateral wool art games
- ambient noise to support students while they do individual or quiet tasks (for example, quiet, calming music playing in the background).

## Theme – Laughter

### Theoretical underpinnings and evidence

Laughter enhances our intake of oxygen-rich air, stimulates various organs (for example, the heart, lungs) and muscles, and increases 'feel good' hormones (for example, endorphins). It can also increase our sense of social connection. When people laugh together, they are more likely to feel positive emotions toward each other (Savage et al. 2019).

## Activities and resources

Ideas for laughter include:

- 'joke of the day' starter activity
- sharing personal, funny stories
- starting lessons with fun video clips to encourage laughter (and provide 'hook' to introduce lesson content)
- games (for example, **Kahoot**, **Blooket**).

## Theme – Connection

### Theoretical underpinnings and evidence

When students feel a sense of belonging at school, their engagement is often enhanced (Willms 2003). High levels of school belonging have been associated with academic success and better long-term developmental outcomes (Palikara et al. 2021). Brain mapping indicates that the subcortical brain areas that are associated with euphoria, reward, and motivation are activated when someone experiences a sense of connection with a 'significant other' (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 2012).

### Activities and resources

- Positive greetings at the door as students enter the classroom.
- Show interest in students' lives (for example, "What did you do this weekend?").
- Classroom rituals (for example, ways of opening and closing learning activities and systems to recognise student effort and achievement).
- Photo scavenger hunt: Create a list of items or scenarios for teams to find and photograph within a specified area. The team that finds and photographs the most items is the winning team.
- 'Yes, No, Maybe' game: Ask students a question and have them walk to the area of the room that matches their answer. Discuss why students chose their answer.

- Trivia competitions where teams answer questions on a variety of topics. Questions can be based on academic subjects, pop culture, students' specific interests, or general knowledge.
- Circle of compliments: Sit in a circle and have each student give a genuine compliment to the person sitting to their right. Continue until everyone has received a compliment.
- Marshmallow challenge: Teams are given spaghetti, tape, string, and a marshmallow. They have a limited time to build the tallest freestanding structure with the marshmallow on top.
- Human knot: Participants stand in a circle, reach across, and grab the hand of someone across from them. Without letting go, they must work together to untangle themselves into a circle again.

## Theme – Breathing

### Theoretical underpinnings and evidence

Voluntary, controlled breathing can cause physiological changes that regulate the stress response. This is achieved by lowering blood pressure and heart rate and reducing levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol (Zaccaro et al. 2018).

### Activities and resources

- Utilise and model these strategies when students are calm. Once you know these are successful for students, you might suggest the student use these strategies if needing help to regain their calm.
- Mindfulness activities.
- Deep belly breathing: Place something light on the belly just above the belly button. Ask students to 'belly breathe'. As you breathe in, the object rises as if on a wave that's passing beneath it. As you exhale, the object sinks back down.
- 4:5 breathing: Breathe in for 4 counts, breathe out for 5 counts.
- The Darth Vader breath: This involves a slight narrowing at the high back of the throat, just behind and below the nose. This will create that soft rushing "h" sound while breathing in and

out. It would be a growl if it came from the bottom of the throat and a snoring sound if it came from high up in the nose. Some describe this sound as ocean waves rolling in and out again.

- Lion's breath: Take a long, deep breath. Open your mouth wide. Make your eyes big. Let your tongue hang out. ROAR!!
- Paired breathing with progressive muscle relaxation: Breathe In to the count of 4 while tensing the muscles in one area of the body (for example, the feet). Breathe out for 5 while relaxing that area of the body. Continue with different parts of the body.
- Blow ping pong balls across the table with a straw. Increase the difficulty by using cotton balls.

## Theme – Resistance

### Theoretical underpinnings and evidence

The heavy work and resistance activities (activities that involve active weight bearing, a push or pull action against resistance) require the use of the body's largest muscle groups. This is thought to be one of our bodies most efficient means of normalising the release and dispersion of stress hormones, such as cortisol.

### Activities and resources

Ideas for resistance include:

- **resistance training for teens** (University of Newcastle)
- carrying or pushing a heavy load (the load should weigh less than 10% of the child's body weight)
- garden projects
- outdoor/climbing play
- jumping (rope, hopscotch, hip/hop dance)
- twister
- yoga

- play-dough
- making things with clay
- pastry/bread making
- doing push-ups (either on the floor or against the wall).

## Theme – Environment

### Theoretical underpinnings and evidence

Time spent in nature, if people feel safe, lowers blood pressure and stress hormones (for example, cortisol) and reduces nervous system arousal (Touloumakos and Barrable 2020). McCormick's (2017) systematic review indicated that children's access to green space promotes attention, moderates the impacts of stress, and improves wellbeing.

### Activities and resources

Ideas for environment include:

- a silent walk outside, stop for silent observation
- an outdoor classroom (for example, lesson on the back oval or in the COLA)
- 'greening up' indoor areas with plants or green walls
- gardening and activities
- bush-tucker activities, involving local elders and bush care groups
- walking students to bubblers at the end of a lesson
- opening the windows to create ventilation
- splash cold water onto face and have a cold drink.



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