

Emotion

Description

Supporting emotional health means recognising that every brain is unique. Neuro-affirmative practices honour the diverse ways children and young people experience, express, and regulate emotions. Everyone experiences emotions differently and that's okay. Whether you're a young person learning to understand your feelings, or a parent/ carer supporting someone.

What Is Emotional Regulation?

- Emotional regulation means noticing your feelings and finding ways to manage them that feel safe and helpful.
- Some people feel things more deeply or express emotions in unique ways. That's not wrong—it's just different.
- For young people, especially those who are neurodivergent (like autistic or ADHD), emotions might feel bigger or harder to explain. That's where support from trusted adults really matters.
- Co-regulation—when someone helps you calm down by being calm and kind themselves—is often more helpful than trying to “go calm down” alone.

Impact on neurodiverse young people

- Emotional regulation can take more time or feel more intense for neurodivergent young people. What may look like misbehaviour is often an attempt to cope with overwhelming feelings. Adults can support by offering calm environments, time, and tools for self-expression. Emotional strengths often include strong empathy, fairness, and creative coping strategies.
- Neurodivergent young people might feel emotions more strongly or for longer than others. That doesn't mean something is wrong - it just means their brains work differently. You might see a young person have a big emotional reaction to things like:
 - Losing a game
 - Not getting the result they hoped for
 - Making a mistake
 - Being in the spotlight
 - When plans change suddenly
 - Not finishing something on time

- Having a problem they don't know how to fix
- Trying something new
- Having trouble with a friend

To an adult or another young person, the reaction might seem like "too much", but for that young person, their feelings are real, strong, and hard to manage in that moment. Some people might call it an "overreaction," but that's not fair or true. Neurodivergent young people are not choosing to be upset. They are not trying to be difficult. Their brains are just working in a way that can make emotions feel extra big and overwhelming sometimes. Just like we wouldn't expect someone with a broken leg to run a race, we shouldn't expect all young people to manage emotions the same way - especially when their brain finds that really hard.

- If a young person is calm, that's great! If they're having a hard time, it doesn't mean they are doing anything wrong - it means they need extra support, care, and understanding. Sometimes the same young person can handle a tricky situation really well one day, and struggle with it the next. That's normal. Their brain might just be more tired, overwhelmed, or full of feelings that day. Using a neuro-affirmative approach Instead of focusing on "fixing" a young person's emotions, we focus on helping them feel safe and strong in their own way. We look for patterns and supports that help the young person feel safe and steady (sleep, food, breaks, trusted people, calm spaces). We can also notice the strengths of the young person, like kindness, fairness, or deep caring.

Benefits of support

Sometimes, neurodivergent young people feel very big emotions, and that's okay. When this happens, they need extra support. Here are some ways of using a neuro-affirmative approach to help with emotion:

- Co-regulation – this means staying calm with the young person and helping them feel safe
- Reducing demands – giving them a break from tasks or expectations
- Sensory safety – making sure the space around them feels comfortable, not too loud, bright, or overwhelming
- Empathy – showing care, kindness, and understanding
- Communication – helping them to name or express feelings can sometimes make coping easier

What Helps?

- ✓ Stay calm and kind
- ✓ Don't take it personally
- ✓ Offer space or quiet time if needed
- ✓ Let the young person know it's okay to feel big feelings
- ✓ Talk about what happened after they feel safe again

At home:

- ✓ Talk about feelings when things are calm.
- ✓ Try feelings charts, choice cards, or scales ("I feel 3 out of 5").
- ✓ Practice calm tools (breathing, movement, music, quiet time).
- ✓ Play games and model "OK to lose/OK to win".

Interoception and Alexithymia

Alternatively, neurodivergent people might find it difficult to understand and describe their emotions.

Interoception is one of our senses. It means 'internal awareness' and is how we understand and act on the signals coming from inside our bodies (e.g., hunger, thirst, pain, needing to go to the bathroom, how hot or cold we feel). Neurodivergent – and particularly autistic – people may have differences in how 'active' their sense of interoception is. This means that we can be 'over' responsive to the signals our bodies give us (e.g. not know when to stop eating because we still feel hungry, or experience people brushing past us as painful) or 'under' responsive (e.g. find it difficult to tell how we are feeling, leave it to the last minute to go to the bathroom, forget to drink). This is important to hold in mind when supporting young people who have differences in their interoception. It might be particularly difficult for these young people to describe how they are feeling. Alexithymia means difficulty with understanding and/or describing your feelings and emotions. This can sometimes make it harder to understand other people's feelings too.

Regulation and Dysregulation - DISTRESS RESPONSES

Our bodies have inbuilt reactions to stress and threats in our world and environment. Our bodies developed these responses thousands of years ago to protect us from threats in the

wild, like having to run away from a lion! Even though hopefully most of us don't have to deal with the real threat of being chased by a lion anymore, our bodies still respond to protect us by using the same strategies.

The main three you might hear about are:

Flight – our bodies mobilise to fight the attacker!

Fight – our bodies mobilise to run away from the attacker.

Freeze – we 'play dead' so we are of no interest to the attacker.

Neurodivergent people are more likely to experience stress in their day to day lives. This is due to living in a world which is not always well designed to support us. Sometimes people use the words 'meltdown' or 'shutdown' to talk about these distress responses. Meltdowns are the body's overwhelming 'fight' or 'flight' responses to stress. It tends to be expressed outwardly and can be thought of as similar to a panic attack.

WHEN YOU HAVE A MELTDOWN YOU MIGHT:

- Have feelings of intense anxiety, adrenaline or anger
- Not be able to speak or think clearly
- Express these big feelings outwardly through shouting, crying, hurting yourself or others, throwing or breaking objects, running away etc

Shutdowns are the body's 'freeze' response to stress. A shutdown has all the same overwhelming and distressing feelings as a meltdown, but instead of the feelings being expressed outwardly, they are trapped inside.

WHEN YOU HAVE A SHUTDOWN YOU MIGHT:

- Find it difficult to speak, or you might not talk at all.
- Want to hide away somewhere dark and alone, or curl up in bed.
- Feel like you suddenly have no energy at all and want to sleep, or find it difficult to move.
- Feel 'spaced out' and detached from what is happening.

Practical Tips & Tools for Emotional Regulation

These can be used alongside formal services:

Supporting Dysregulation

Adults can help reduce the chance of young people experiencing distress response by:

- Thinking about and keeping a diary of common triggers for stress. These might be things like sensory overwhelm or unexpected changes. Think about what was happening over whole day and not just the one event that might have 'tipped' the young person over the edge of their capacity to cope.
- Also keep a note of what helps the young person feel safe and regulated again.
- Over time, find ways to reduce or remove these triggers. Help the young person find ways to manage these triggers e.g. wearing headphones in noisy places if noise is a trigger.
- When the young person feels safe and settled, work with them to notice patterns – the things that happen again and again. Talk with them about what might help them when things feel really hard – at a time of stress. Make a plan together. Adults can help young people having a meltdown or shut down by:
 - Staying calm and non-judgemental.
 - Remember: the young person is in acute distress, they are not choosing to behave this way, and they are not 'being naughty'.
 - Reduce extra sensory 'input' such as trying to talk until the young person is regulated again.
 - Offering access to a safe space with clear exit routes.
 - If the young person is very distressed, remove things they may use to hurt themselves or others.
 - Offer the young person access to special interests and sensory regulation.
 - Some young people appreciate quiet company or 'being alongside' others to help them regulate, others will need alone time.

Name the feeling.

Emotion coaching: helping children name their feelings ("I can see you're feeling angry/sad/frustrated") and helping them learn what to do with those feelings.

- Try saying how you feel: "I'm overwhelmed," "I'm excited," or "I'm not sure what I feel."
- Use visuals, emojis, or colours if words are tricky.

Calm the Body

Mindfulness / breathing exercises: simple practices daily can help with regulation (there are lots of kid-friendly apps / online videos).

- Try breathing slowly, squeezing a stress toy, or listening to music.
- Offer sensory-friendly options—like a quiet space, a weighted blanket, or a calming activity.
- Movement helps too! Try stretching, dancing, or walking together.

Use Visual Supports

Visual supports or “zones” tools: e.g. Zones of Regulation – a framework to help children learn to understand and control their emotions. (Being used in some local programmes.)

- Try colour zones, emotion charts, or apps can help track how you’re feeling.
- Tools like Zones of Regulation can be adapted to your child’s needs—make them personal and fun.

Create Safe, Predictable Spaces

Routine & safe environments: consistency helps emotional regulation. Clear expectations, rituals, recognising and reinforcing when children manage emotions well.

- Knowing what’s coming next can help you feel more in control.
- Use routines, visual schedules, and gentle transitions. Celebrate emotional wins, no matter how small.

Express Emotions Creatively

Creative outlets: art, music, movement, nature. Groups like Listening Ear’s Emotional Youth Club do things like this.

- Draw, paint, write, sing, or build something to show how you feel.
- Encourage creative outlets without needing explanations. Let them lead.

Stay Connected

- It’s okay to ask for help, a hug, or just someone to sit with you.
- Be present. Your calm presence helps regulate your child’s nervous system. You don’t need to fix everything—just be there.

Whether you’re a young person learning about your emotions, or an adult supporting someone, remember there’s no one ‘right’ way to feel or cope. What matters is finding what works for you and doing it together.

Resources

Local Programmes

Healthy Young Minds

Resources are bespoke to where you live. It is essential to get early advice & help for children, young people and families around emotional wellbeing and mental health.

- Youth Fed.org – NW programmes for emotional wellbeing and mental health support funded by national lottery plus locally commissioned services through the ICB:
- [Your Mind Matters \(Mental Health & Wellbeing\) - Youth Fed](#)
- Young Hearts, Strong Minds [Young Hearts, Strong Minds - Youth Fed](#)

Emotionally Healthy Children and Young People

Your Nursery, School and early help support groups may be able to help with advice, signposting and onward referrals if required.

- myHappyMind – Parents support via website – along with early years and whole school based programmes Nationally – works to [Empower Your Family with Science-Based Mental Health Strategies](#)

Emotional Health & Wellbeing

There may be peer support and/or group supports sessions in your area with one-to-one counselling, group sessions and digital self-help.

Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust – CAMHS & related services

- Covering Halton, Knowsley, St Helens, Warrington etc. [Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust+1](#)
- Includes crisis response, early intervention, mental health support teams in schools, eating disorder services etc. [Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust+2](#)[Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust+2](#)

Schools Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs)

- These are present in many schools across Cheshire & Merseyside. They provide early detection/prevention of emotional and mental health issues, offer workshops, pastoral support etc. [NHS Cheshire and Merseyside+2](#)[NHS Cheshire and Merseyside+2](#)

Voluntary & Charitable Supports

- Youth Clubs can offer support for the individual and the family for older children. Services can include: therapy, offers ongoing group support, creative workshops, art, honest conversations etc.
- Resolve@ (The Children's Society): A wellbeing service for young people aged ~8-18, especially those who have experienced domestic violence or abuse. childrenssociety.org.uk
- Child Victims of Crime: There are various offers of support for victims of crime.

Victim Support

The main charity providing free, confidential help for victims of crime in England & Wales. They have specific support for children and young people, including resources for parents and professionals.

24/7 Supportline: **0808 16 89 111** [Victim Support](#)

- My Support Space: interactive self-help guides, wellbeing tools, etc. [Victim Support+1](#)
- They offer emotional and practical help, whether or not the crime was reported.
- There are also Violence Reduction programmes offering tools & training, including "Zones of Regulation" training, trauma-informed training, etc.

Online One-Stop Platforms

- Kind to Your Mind: A regional website for Cheshire & Merseyside providing advice, self-help tools, apps and signposting based on how someone is feeling. cwip.org.uk

National contacts and Websites for support

Action for Children is a good resource for Emotional Health and Wellbeing. [Action for Children](#)

Young Minds

Focused on children and young people's mental health. Lots of free advice, guides, and signposting.

Website: youngminds.org.uk [supportline.org.uk+2CAMHS Academy+2](#)

Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families

Offers resources on wellbeing, mental health, and a crisis text-service (text "AFC" to 85258) for people feeling overwhelmed. [Anna Freud+2Speak Out Magazine online+2](#)

Childline (NSPCC)

Free, confidential advice and counselling for children and young people under 19 (phone 0800 1111). [supportline.org.uk+3NSPCC+3Google Sites+3](#)

Kooth

An online counselling and emotional wellbeing platform for young people (11–24). [allaboutkids+3CNWL NHS Trust+3Google Sites+3](#)

MindEd for Families

A free learning resource for parents/carers about children's and young people's mental health. [Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust+1](#)

The Mix

Supports under-25s on a broad range of issues including emotional health, relationships, stress, etc. [Google Sites+2supportline.org.uk+2](#)

PAPYRUS – HOPELine UK

Support for young people up to 35 with suicidal thoughts (and for those supporting them).