

Parents are increasingly saying their child is 'dysregulated.' What does that actually mean?

May 30 2024, by Cher McGillivray and Shawna Mastro Campbell



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Welcome aboard the roller coaster of parenthood, where emotions run wild, tantrums reign supreme and love flows deep.

As children reach toddlerhood and beyond, parents adapt to manage their child's big emotions and meltdowns. Parenting terminology has adapted too, with more parents describing their child as "dysregulated."

But what does this actually mean?

More than an emotion

[Emotional dysregulation](#) refers to challenges a child faces in recognizing and expressing emotions, and managing [emotional reactions](#) in social settings.

This may involve either suppressing emotions or displaying exaggerated and intense emotional responses that get in the way of the child doing what they want or need to do.

"[Dysregulation](#)" is more than just feeling an emotion. An emotion is a signal, or cue, that can give us important insights to ourselves and our preferences, desires and goals.

An emotionally dysregulated brain is overwhelmed and overloaded (often, with distressing emotions like frustration, disappointment and fear) and is ready to fight, flight or freeze.

Developing emotional regulation

Emotion regulation is a skill that develops across childhood and is influenced by factors such as the child's [temperament](#) and the emotional environment in which they are raised.

In the [stage of emotional development](#) where [emotion regulation](#) is a primary goal (around 3–5 years old), children begin exploring their

surroundings and asserting their desires more actively.

It's typical for them to experience emotional dysregulation when their initiatives are thwarted or criticized, leading to occasional tantrums or outbursts.

A typically developing child will see these types of outbursts reduce as their [cognitive abilities](#) become more sophisticated, usually around the age they start school.

Express, don't suppress

Expressing emotions in childhood is crucial for social and emotional development. It involves the ability to convey feelings verbally and through facial expressions and body language.

When children struggle with emotional expression, it can manifest in various ways, such as difficulty in being understood, flat [facial expressions](#) even in emotionally charged situations, challenges in forming close relationships, and indecisiveness.

Several factors, including anxiety, [attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder](#) (ADHD), autism, giftedness, rigidity and both mild and significant [trauma experiences](#), can contribute to these issues.

Common mistakes parents can make is dismissing emotions, or distracting children away from how they feel.

These strategies don't work and increase feelings of overwhelm. In the long term, they fail to equip children with the skills to identify, express and communicate their emotions, making them vulnerable to future emotional difficulties.

We need to help children move compassionately towards their difficulties, rather than away from them. Parents need to do this for themselves too.

Caregiving and skill modeling

Parents are responsible for creating an [emotional climate](#) that facilitates the development of emotion regulation skills.

Parents' own modeling of emotion regulation when they feel distressed. The way they respond to the expression of emotions in their children, contributes to how children understand and regulate their own emotions.

Children are hardwired to be attuned to their caregivers' emotions, moods, and coping as this is integral to their survival. In fact, their biggest threat to a child is their caregiver not being OK.

Unsafe, unpredictable, or chaotic home environments rarely give children exposure to healthy emotion expression and regulation. Children who go through [maltreatment](#) have a harder time controlling their emotions, needing more brainpower for tasks that involve managing feelings. This struggle could lead to more problems with emotions later on, like feeling anxious and [hypervigilant to potential threats](#).

Recognizing and addressing these challenges early on is essential for supporting children's emotional well-being and development.

A dysregulated brain and body

When kids enter "fight or flight" mode, they often struggle to cope or listen to reason. When children experience acute stress, they may

respond instinctively without pausing to consider strategies or logic.

If your child is in fight mode, you might observe behaviors such as crying, clenching fists or jaw, kicking, punching, biting, swearing, spitting or screaming.

In flight mode, they may appear restless, have darting eyes, exhibit excessive fidgeting, breathe rapidly, or try to run away.

A shut-down response may look like fainting or a panic attack.

When a child feels threatened, their brain's frontal lobe, responsible for rational thinking and problem-solving, essentially goes offline.

This happens when the amygdala, the brain's alarm system, sends out a false alarm, triggering the survival instinct.

In this state, a child may not be able to access higher functions like reasoning or decision-making.

While our instinct might be to immediately fix the problem, [staying present](#) with our child during these moments is more effective. It's about providing support and understanding until they feel safe enough to engage their higher brain functions again.

Reframe your thinking so you see your child as having a problem—not being the problem.

Tips for parents

Take turns discussing the highs and lows of the day at [meal times](#). This is a chance for you to be curious, acknowledge and label feelings, and model that you, too, experience a range of emotions that require you to

put into practice skills to cope and has shown evidence in numerous physical, social-emotional, academic and behavioral benefits.

Spending even small amounts (five minutes a day!) of quality one-on-one time with your child is an investment in your child's emotional well-being. Let them pick the activity, do your best to follow their lead, and try to notice and comment on the things they do well, like creative ideas, persevering when things are difficult, and being gentle or kind.

Take a tip from parents of [children](#) with neurodiversity: learn about your unique child. Approaching your child's emotions, temperament, and behaviors with curiosity can help you to help them develop emotion regulation skills.

When to get help

If [emotion dysregulation](#) is a persistent issue that is getting in the way of your child feeling happy, calm, or confident—or interfering with learning or important relationships with family members or peers—talk to their GP about engaging with a mental health professional.

Many families have found [parenting programs](#) helpful in creating a climate where emotions can be safely expressed and shared.

Remember, you can't pour from an empty cup. [Parenting](#) requires you to be your best self and [tend to your needs first](#) to see your child flourish.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Parents are increasingly saying their child is 'dysregulated.' What does that actually mean? (2024, May 30) retrieved 20 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-05-parents-child-dysregulated.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.