Imagine a child who is able to express needs, desires, and frustrations verbally instead of physically. Alternatively, imagine a child who acts out uncontrollably by screaming, kicking, and hitting. These two examples highlight the essence of emotion expression.

Emotion regulation describes an individual’s ability to respond to environmental stimuli with a range of emotions in a controlled manner (Panfile and Laible 2012). In other words, emotion regulation is the ability to gauge the appropriate level and range of emotional response to a given situation.

The development of emotion regulation evolves throughout the lifespan (Cole, Dennis, Smith-Simon, and Cohen 2009). Children as young as 1 year of age are able to unconsciously regulate their emotions. In addition, the years between 3 and 5 (entrance into kindergarten) may be especially important to children’s understanding of others’ emotional responses as well as their own understanding of the events that may evoke specific emotional responses.

For example, when 18-month-old Cheri’s dad returns home after being absent for the past year, Cheri looks warily at Dad’s outstretched arms. She is frightened but simply turns away and clings fast to her mom. She is establishing a foundation for the ability to problem solve and express emotions verbally (Schatz et al. 2008).

Over time as Cheri becomes familiar with her dad and encounters other strangers, she gradually gains awareness of her fears and observes what adults and peers do in similar situations. Through experience and guidance, she becomes able to regulate her emotions verbally rather than physically (Schatz et al. 2008).

The development of these mechanisms during the early childhood years is imperative for developing the ability to regulate emotions during childhood and later in life (Cole et al. 2009).

Emotion regulation is a significant developmental milestone (Calkins, Smith, Gill, and Johnson 1998). Research indicates strong negative ramifications for children who do not achieve or develop the ability to regulate their emotions.

Children with poor emotion regulation skills are more likely to display defiant or aggressive behaviors toward others as compared to children who have acquired emotional skills (Calkins et al. 1998; Schatz et al. 2008). Furthermore, children who do not fully develop emotional regulation skills are likely to experience difficulties forming meaningful relationships with others (Stack et al. 2010).

**The role of teachers**

Teachers play a significant role in helping young children refine and control their emotional responses to situations (Panfile and Laible 2012). Teachers serve as role models that affect preschool children’s behaviors and the degree to which they express their emotions.
Social learning theory can help us understand the significance of teachers. Adults serve as both models and reinforcers—a skilled teacher influences children’s motivation to behave in a developmentally appropriate, socially acceptable manner. Children watch and they imitate (Bandura 1969; Rotter 1960).

Imagine a child who watches a teacher’s behavior and then later uses the same behavior toward others in the same situation. This highlights the essence of imitation, which emerges between the ages of 18 and 24 months of age (Meltzoff 1988).

**PARTICULAR TIMES IN THE PRESCHOOL DAY INVITE FOCUS ON EMOTION REGULATION.**

In kindergarten, for instance, Ms. Wilson invites children to help Michael pick up the blocks before having snack. The children observe Michael’s frustration and Ms. Wilson’s kneeling on the floor and returning the blocks to the shelves. The children quickly respond and are rewarded with smiles and kind words. As a result, the children will likely imitate these same behaviors when interacting with their peers in the same situation (Bandura and Barab 1971).

**Positive guidance**

A teacher’s positive-guidance practices impact children’s ability to control or regulate their emotions (Ahn 2005). More specifically, teachers may positively guide their preschool students to express their emotions verbally, rather than through physical means (Ahn 2005).

To support children’s verbal expression, teachers can help preschoolers recognize and name their own emotions. For example, a teacher can help children associate a particular feeling with the related verbal description by giving simple directions like, “Show me how your body feels when you are frustrated, gleeful, or content,” for example.

Teachers can provide support and encouragement by modeling appropriate emotional responses to certain events in a controlled fashion (McLaughlin 2008). For example, when Benjamin argues with Chris about who gets the tricycle first, Ms. Wilson might say, “When you jerk the handles like that, I’m concerned that one of you will get hurt. How about talking about what you want?”

Experienced teachers choose to use problem-solving techniques rather than expressing punitive or belittling comments about children’s behavior (Whitchurch and Sprague 2011). Problem-solving techniques may include asking students to role play to adopt the perception of another (Whitchurch and Sprague 2011). This technique may serve as a building block that fosters students’ emotion awareness, and is essential to emotion regulation.

**Opportunities in the school day**

Particular times in the preschool day invite focus on emotion regulation. Meal time, transitions, and story time are often fraught with emotional triggers like boredom, hunger, tiredness, and impatience. Teachers can help guide preschool students to express what they are feeling and offer immediate feedback.

By recognizing and anticipating challenging times of the day, a teacher can model body control and readily share the language of appropriate emotional expression.

At story time, for example, teachers can offer age-appropriate books to assist children as young as 2 years in understanding, regulating, and expressing their emotions (Zambo and Hansen 2007). Books and stories—especially those with repetitive sections and rhymes—support children’s expressive language development.

A byproduct of stories is an increased vocabulary, an essential in a child’s increased ability to express emotions (Zambo and Hansen 2007). Especially effective books include *Each Peach Pear Plum* by Janet and Allan Ahlberg, *The Relatives Came* by Cynthia Rylant and Stephen Gammel, *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury, and *Sheep in a Jeep* by Nancy E. Shaw and Margot Apple. Each provides visual and language clues to emotional expression.

In addition to offering support in the development of children’s emotion regulation, teachers need to remember the value of play.

**The significance of play**

The integration of free play in the early childhood classroom is key to children’s increased ability to
regulate their emotions (Hoffmann and Russ 2011). Play fosters social interactions and emotional development (Hunter 2008).

When Jason continually refuses to let Ethan have any yellow Legos®, for example, Ethan chooses instead to join Kristen in building a rocket ship. Jason soon observes how much fun they’re having and barges in. “No,” Ethan says, reminding Jason how he hoarded the yellow blocks. “OK,” Jason says, “you can have some yellow ones.”

Through such interactions with peers, children begin to develop care and empathy toward others, which in turn assists in their development of emotion regulation (Ashiabi 2007).

As another example, Melissa is pretending to be the teacher in the dramatic play center. Erin and Joycelyn start engaging in mild horseplay and don’t listen while Melissa tries to read a book aloud. With patience wearing thin, Melissa orders, “Time out!” Melissa begins to understand the frustration Ms. Wilson sometimes feels when students don’t pay attention. Melissa also gains added confidence in her ability to take control of a situation.

Sociodramatic play activities like these enable preschool children to take others’ points of view through participation (Ashiabi 2007). By engaging in pretend play, children build the tools to interact with others and conform to social rules. These experiences assist children in establishing the foundation for developing emotion regulation (Hoffmann and Russ 2011).

**Enhancing play in early childhood classrooms**

As we have seen, play is essential in the lives of young children. In addition, specific guidelines can help teachers integrate play in early childhood classrooms (Kostelnik et al. 2007).

- Make the classroom environment welcoming for play activities and create spaces that enhance play opportunities. Become more attuned to children’s interests. When Ms. Wilson sees that her students enjoy learning about the doctor’s office, for example, she provides props that enable children to pretend they are in this setting.
- Promote pretend play within the curriculum. Ask children to use their imaginations about specific events, such as the Fourth of July parade, to spur a wealth of play ideas, or inspirations.
- Allow children to play without adult guidance or direction. Offer cardboard boxes, balls, or scarves for use in unstructured play in the classroom as well as on the playground.
- Provide guidance or assistance to children who are having difficulty completing a task or expanding their play activities. When Marcus hesitates to join others in a circle game, for example, Ms. Wilson offers to hold his hand and says, “I’ll stand with you here and watch.”
- Show children how to use materials to enhance their play experiences. In the sand and water play center, for example, show children how to use the potato masher and other kitchen utensils to make imprints in the wet sand.
- Provide children with play materials that foster a certain play theme. After reading about construction, for example, offer hard hats and blueprints in the block center, or offer clay, paint, glue, and other art supplies in the art center.

**Preparing for a lifetime**

While emotion regulation develops throughout the
lifespan, the preschool years set the stage for later emotional expression and regulation—and the formation of successful social relationships. Teachers can help children build these emotional skills with as much planning, understanding, and support as they use in any other facet of the early childhood classroom.

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