

Zones of Regulation – Introduction

What do we mean by emotional regulation?

Occupational therapists, psychologists and other health professionals often talk about emotional regulation. But what do we really mean by this? Emotional regulation is the process by which we understand, experience and express, or choose not to express, our emotions. It is sometimes known as self-control, impulse control, or self-regulation. Emotional regulation includes being able to:

- Control how we react to strong emotions like anger, excitement, or embarrassment
- Calm down after experiencing something upsetting or exciting
- Focus on a task, and transition to new tasks
- Adjust to change
- Display emotions and behaviour in ways that are seen to be socially appropriate
- Control impulses

Children (and adults) who have difficulties with emotional regulation (also called dysregulation) may express this through such things as:

- Emotional outbursts
- Meltdowns
- Tantrums
- Destructive or risky behaviours
- Withdrawal from, and difficulties interacting with, others
- Difficulty understanding others' perspectives
- Having difficulty calming down no matter what you do or say

Emotional regulation is a developmental process that continues throughout childhood and into at least early adulthood. It is important to match your expectations of behaviour to children's stage of development. For example, difficulties regulating emotions are typical for toddlers, but if challenges continue as children get older and you are worried it's a good idea to speak with a health professional.



Supporting the development of emotional regulation

Children can be supported in their development of emotional regulation through strategies including:

- Talking about emotions and how different emotions make the body feel
- Naming body signals and emotions that you identify in your child, for example: "I can see you clenching your fists. You're feeling angry about having to pack away your toys"
- Helping your child to understand the difference between emotions and behaviours. For example: "it's ok to feel angry that your sister took your toy, but it is never ok to hit"
- Working through problems collaboratively once everyone is calm
- Modelling emotional regulation skills and talking about your own emotions and reactions to challenging or exciting situations
- Modelling the connections between body signals and emotions, for example: "My heart started to beat really fast when I had to do a presentation at work today, I was feeling really nervous"
- Modelling persistence with difficult tasks and problem solving strategies
- Practicing strategies to regulate when feeling overwhelmed or upset
- Providing positive reinforcement when your child handles a difficult situation well.

There are also specific programs designed to support the development of regulation skills, such as the Zones of Regulation.

What are the Zones of Regulation?

The Zones of Regulation is an evidence-based program developed over the past 15 years by occupational therapist Leah Kuypers and team in the US. It is designed to support children to develop the skills needed to become aware of their body signals, make responsible decisions, and learn to regulate their emotions and actions. The program is based on four Zones, each represented by a different colour. Children are supported to:

- Learn to recognise when they are in each of the Zones and link their **body signals** with **emotions**
- Learn to recognise **triggers** (unwelcome events and situations that lead to uncomfortable feelings) and **sparks** (welcome events or situations that cause strong feelings of joy)
- Learn to pause, notice their body signals, how they are feeling and **identify which Zone** they are in
- Identify **strategies or tools** to stay in a Zone, or to move from one Zone to another if needed, depending on which Zone works best for the activity they are engaged in
- These strategies include calming techniques, cognitive strategies, and sensory tools. Together we refer to them as a **Toolbox** of strategies to support emotional regulation.

Evidence to date suggests that the program can improve self-regulation skills, social awareness and communication, self-confidence, decrease emotional distress, and reduce the use of exclusionary discipline (when used at a whole-class or whole school level).



The Yellow Zone

- The Yellow Zone is used to describe times when we are feeling heightened emotions and may feel like we are starting to lose some control.
- The Yellow Zone includes emotions like excited, frustrated, nervous, anxious, worried, silly, scared, annoyed, overwhelmed, jealous, upset, embarrassed, grumpy, and confused.

The Red Zone

- The Red Zone is used to describe extremely heightened states of alertness and very intense feelings. A person in the Red Zone is very overwhelmed by their feelings and experiencing a loss of control.
- The Red Zone includes emotions like mad, angry, mean, terrified, out of control, aggressive and yelling.

The Zones

The Blue Zone

- The Blue Zone is used to describe low states of alertness, when our body or brain is moving slowly or sluggishly.
- The Blue Zone includes emotions like hurt, sad, tired, sick, shy, bored, and exhausted.

The Green Zone

- The Green Zone is used to describe times when we are feeling regulated and in control. When we are in the Green Zone we are able to successfully engage in activities like school work and socialising.
- The Green Zone includes emotions like calm, happy, relaxed, thankful, focused, content, and proud.

Everyone experiences all the Zones at different times. Different Zones work well for different situations/activities.

Avoid talking about the Yellow and Red Zones as being "bad" zones or the Green Zone being the "good" zone.



Examples of emotions in each Zone

These colour coded visuals can help you explore different emotions within each Zone with your child.

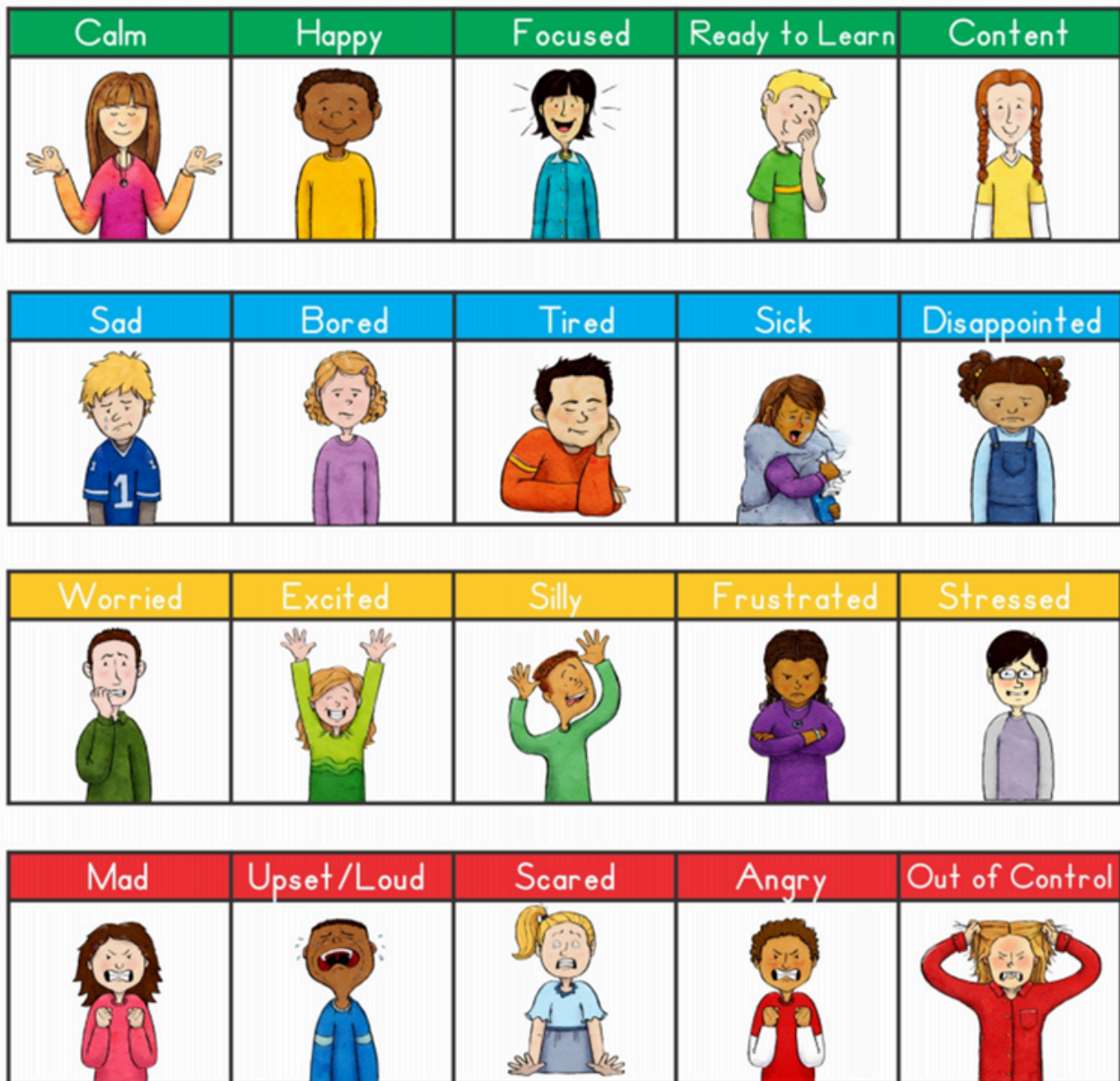


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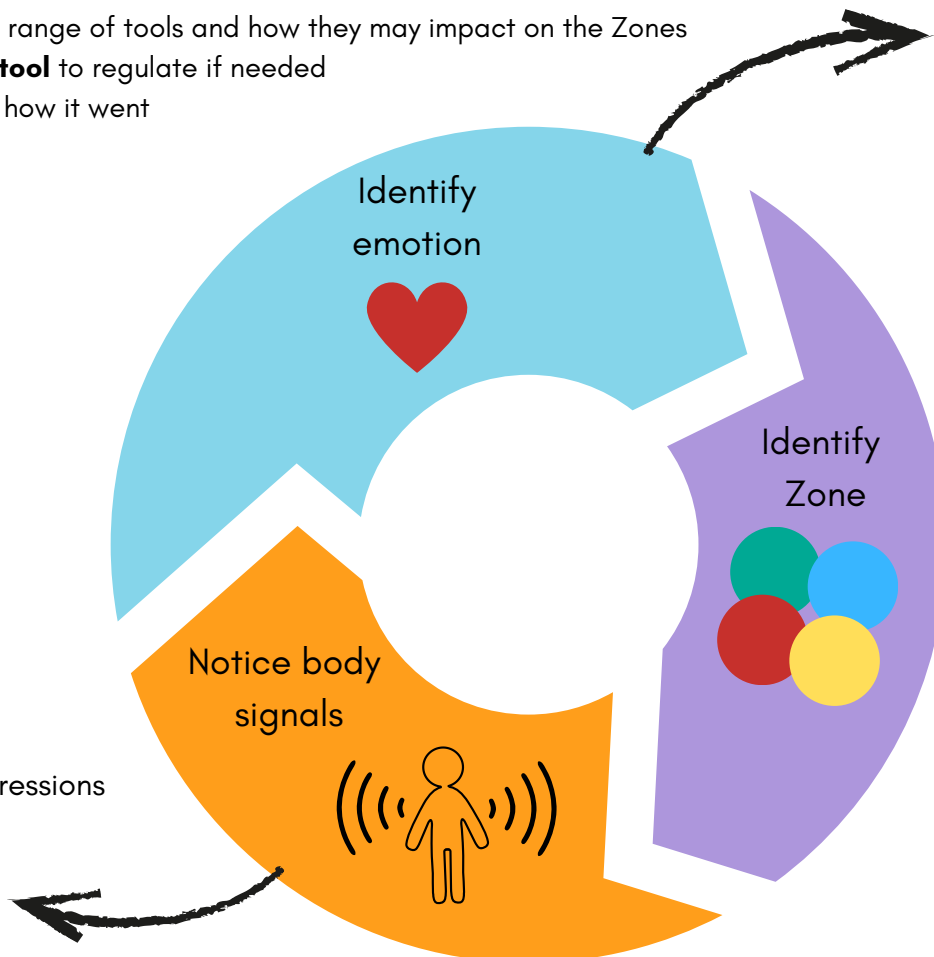
Zones Check In

The Zones encourages us to:

- **Notice** when we are being impacted by a problem, trigger or spark
- **Pause** to check in on our body signals
- Identify how we are **feeling**
- **Identify** which Zone we are in
- Consider a range of tools and how they may impact on the Zones
- **Choose a tool** to regulate if needed
- **Reflect** on how it went

For example:

- Heart rate
- Breathing
- Muscles
- Energy
- Movement
- Facial expressions
- Stomach
- Thinking



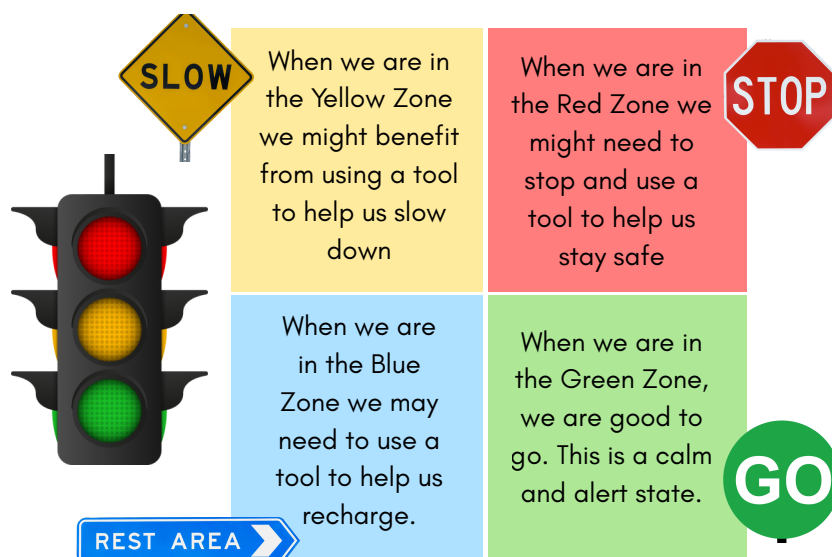
For example:

- Tired
- Bored
- Worried
- Silly
- Frustrated
- Scared
- Overjoyed
- Calm
- Mad
- Sad

Blue
Green
Yellow
Red

Using a traffic light analogy may help some children understand the Zones

Again it is important to remember that being in the Red Zone is not “bad” – each Zone works well for certain activities/situations. For example the Red Zone is needed to protect us from unsafe situations, the blue zone works well at bedtime. It is when our Zone does not match the activity/situation we are needing to engage in that we may need to utilise tools to help us.



Examples of tools or strategies that can be helpful in different Zones

- It is important to note that tools that work for one person may not work for another
- We all need to try out different tools to see what works best for us
- Your occupational therapist may be able to help to guide more specific tool choice based on things such as your child's sensory profile
- The below examples are just that – examples of the range of tools or strategies that may assist children to regulate their emotions. Tools from one Zone may also help in other Zones depending on individual needs and the demands of the environment at the time

Tools that might help in the Yellow Zone

- Stretching or yoga
- Getting out in nature
- Walking
- Listening to music
- Writing or drawing
- Breathing and mindfulness exercises
- Sensory tools like fidgets, weighted toys, and putty
- Squishy hugs or deep pressure

Tools that might help in the Red Zone

- Breathing and mindfulness exercises
- Movement and exercise
- Jumping, bouncing, and swinging
- Talking to an adult
- Heavy work activities requiring carrying, pushing, or pulling
- Listening to music
- Sensory tools
- Noise-cancelling headphones

Tools that might help in the Blue Zone

- Drinking water
- Exercising
- Getting fresh air
- Chewing
- Lively music
- Movement breaks
- Having a rest
- Quiet activities like reading, drawing or doodling

Tools that might help in the Green Zone

- Helping others
- Writing in a journal
- Reflecting on how you are managing and what is going well

References and further information and ideas

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