

## Emotional Regulation Milestones

Supporting children to recognise, express, and manage big feelings.

Emotional regulation is the ability to notice feelings, respond appropriately, and return to a calm or focused state. These skills begin developing from birth and continue into adolescence. Occupational Therapists support this growth through co-regulation, routine, sensory strategies, and play.

### Birth to 1 year

- Calms with caregiver's touch, rocking, or voice
- Cries to signal their needs and discomfort
- Starts smiling and laughing in response to people
- Begins self-soothing (e.g. thumb sucking, clutching a blanket)

### 1 to 2 years

- Expresses frustration and anger through crying or tantrums
- Uses gestures or simple words to express needs
- Seeks comfort from familiar adults and expresses affection.
- Defends possessions/toys
- Begins calming with support or predictable routines

### 2 to 3 years

- Names basic emotions (e.g. happy, sad, mad) with support
- May start using self-soothing behaviours (e.g. cuddling a toy)
- Recovers from upset more easily with support
- Starts waiting short periods and following simple boundaries

### 3 to 4 years

- Labels emotions in self and others (e.g. "She's sad.")
- Begins to try calming strategies like deep breaths when prompted
- Tolerates small disappointments more consistently
- May remove self from overwhelming situations
- Aware of self as a whole person involving their mind, body and feelings

### 4 to 5 years

- Describes feelings in more detail ("I'm nervous about that")
- Predicts social-emotional outcomes (e.g. "If I yell, they'll be sad")
- Uses calming strategies with less adult input (e.g. drawing, sensory play)
- Regulates emotions across longer transitions (e.g. home to school)

### 6+ years

- Understands complex feelings (e.g. "I feel proud and nervous")
- Recognises signs of emotional overload and may request support
- Uses a toolbox of strategies (e.g. quiet space, journaling, talking to a trusted adult)
- Reflects on emotional experiences and problem-solves for next time
- May be prone to jealousy with siblings and friends

### Emotional Challenges May Be Linked To:

- **ADHD** (attention and regulation difficulties)
- **Autism** (emotional processing and sensory sensitivity)
- **Trauma or early stress** (nervous system regulation differences)
- **Sensory Processing Differences**
- **Attachment-based concerns**
- **Anxiety or mood disorders** (in older children)



This flyer is intended as a **general guide** to support understanding of developmental skills across age ranges. It is **not a diagnostic tool** and should not be used to make formal assessments or diagnoses.

Children develop at different rates, and variation is normal. However, **persistent challenges in one or more areas** may suggest an underlying difference or condition.