

SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S EMOTIONS

Giving time and space

Keeping everyone safe

Firstly, you need to make sure that all children and adults are safe. Your setting might have specific procedures in place for when you feel a child is not keeping themselves, or others, safe. Make sure you know what this is for your setting.

Big emotions

When children are highly dysregulated and are unable to manage their emotions they may release those emotions verbally and/or physically. Understanding that they are trying to communicate their feelings with you is key. Avoid telling them to stop or pointing out what they are doing is 'wrong'. For some children naming the emotion you think they are experiencing can make them more dysregulated. So, instead of saying something exact like angry or sad, you could say something like 'I can see that you're experiencing some big emotions right now, is there anything I can do to help?'.

Communication

Be gentle and open with the words you use. Don't tell them what you think is going on for them but **wonder** what might be going on for them. Ask how you can help, if they don't know then don't push. Maybe, if you know what they like doing or is calming for them you can wonder if they'd like to do that. Or, you can just give them some time and space to process their feelings and get to a calmer place. You might find it appropriate to communicate with them that you are giving them the time and space they need and will be there for them when they are ready. Let them know that they can come to you when they feel they are able to receive your support.



Remember, you are not there to 'fix' or 'solve' anything for them but you are there to guide, support and educate them.

Playfulness and connection

Playfulness not just play

Whilst play is a great way to regulate, it is important to understand that by being playful you can facilitate connection and support regulation without just taking them outside to, for example, play ball. Being playful might mean you make a joke or a silly face or it could mean that you are just playful with your words or tone of voice.

It's important here that you make sure that you are playful at the right time - for example, making a joke whilst a child is very upset might not be an appropriate time.



Connection

Building a connection will take time and effort. For some children having a connection with an adult will be difficult. This might mean that when you are having a joyful moment with them they might react in a way to 'push you away'. This might be because they aren't used to having such a connection with an adult and aren't sure how to receive your affection, kind words or just you accepting them as they are.

Persevere - this can be really disheartening for you but remind yourself that they might not know how to be or feel comfortable connecting with an adult. You need to make sure that they feel safe and know that you accept and understand them as they are - don't push them to be ok with touch or praise, for example.

Learn what works and feels safe for them and if/when you cross a boundary for them you can always acknowledge that what you did wasn't ok for them and apologise. These are opportunities to show them what safe and secure connection should look like.

Showing you understand them and respect their boundaries will be key to building a connection with them which facilitates your support. They can learn to feel safe with you and in turn they can learn to feel safe at school.

Reflecting

The right time

As mentioned previously, trying to reflect on how to manage a feeling might not be appropriate whilst a child is dysregulated. This will depend on how dysregulated they are and the language and words you use will be vital. Whilst they are dysregulated you can say things like:

"I can see that you're feeling some big emotions right now, I want you to know that I am here for you when you're ready."

If they are expressing their feelings physically by hitting or hurting themselves, for example, you could acknowledge the big feelings and the need to get them out physically and suggest a safer way to release the feelings.

Reflecting effectively

When the child has begun to regulate or are regulated again, you can find a space where they feel safe and begin to reflect.

Art is a great tool to support reflection as it opens up the side of the brain which deals with emotion. So, for example, you could begin colouring and start chatting, after a few minutes you could say something like *"I wonder what happened to make you feel those big feelings earlier?"* and *"What could we do next time to help you manage those feelings?"*. Using soft language is key, using 'we' takes away the pressure on the child as they feel it's something you will do together, that they are not alone. Make sure you're not questioning too deeply but aiming to understand why and offer support for next time.

Process and progress

This is a process and one that will go back and forth. Children's brains are still developing and if they've not had the right support early on then they might not know how to manage their feelings. Even after a number of reflections with the child, they might still not know. Be patient, understand that the child is doing what they can (even if it seems like they are not). As always, if you feel unsure about whether the support you or others are giving is effective, then you can discuss this with SLT.



Ready for learning

Feeling safe to learn

We know that children need to feel safe in order to learn and when children are dysregulated it is likely that something has made them feel unsafe. So, before you return to learning you'll need to make sure that they are regulated/feeling safe enough to learn. This might mean that you can go back to class to learn or, if they don't feel ready for that then you can find another space. You might need to check in with the teacher before you do this so that they are happy for you to continue the learning out of class and can give you any resources etc.

If they aren't ready

Your role is to support children to learn, so not getting them back to learning can feel really frustrating and sometimes worrying. It's important to keep in mind that if they are not ready to learn then you will just need to spend more time getting them to a space where they feel regulated. Don't forget, you can still do things that are educational like go for a walk and find bugs or search for some old cardboard and make a rocket ship. Whilst you're making your rocket ship you can practice skills such as counting, shapes and fine motor skills. Take photos of the process so you can write about it later on too.

Returning to learning

Always check-in before going back to class or returning to learning:

Ask them if they feel ready enough - *"I wonder if you'd feel ready to go back to class soon?"*. Use 'we' instead of 'you' - *"shall we go back to class and take a look at that task?"*. Find the right environment with them. If they say they don't feel like they can go back to class then wonder with them where you could go to learn.

Keep in mind that you are supporting their ability to self-regulate so that they can learn. You want to start off with as much support as they need (or are comfortable with) and gradually support them to regulate and learn more independently. Keep consistent conversations going with the teacher and SLT so that you are confident with the support you are giving.



Below are a few things you might like to consider when working with children with SEMH needs

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