

5 Ways to Build Students' Emotional Regulation Skills

Emotional Regulation is the ability to maintain and adjust our emotional state when faced with challenges or excitement. With students, this ability is how they maintain an even keel throughout a day filled with quizzes, conflicts with friends, mushy tater tots at lunch, an important soccer game against a rival team, *and* an intense load of homework on top of everything else! ***Those students who are well-regulated can cope with everyday stress and are in an emotional state that's conducive to learning.***

Easier said than done, when it comes to the pressure cooker of adolescence.

Why does Emotional Regulation matter?

Emotional regulation forms the backbone upon which other Executive Function skills are supported. A student who is angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed is less able to focus on organization and time management, for example. Those strong emotions tap into more basic brain processes rooted in survival; in essence, intense emotions “short circuit” the effective engagement of the brain’s frontal lobes, where Executive Function skills mainly reside.



“But my child doesn’t rage or throw things. He must be well-regulated, right?”

Emotional Regulation difficulties in students may look different from outbursts typical in the home environment. Students may feel anxious about tests or overwhelmed by complex assignments. They may spend hours making their homework as perfect as

photo credit: [J.E. Theriot](#)

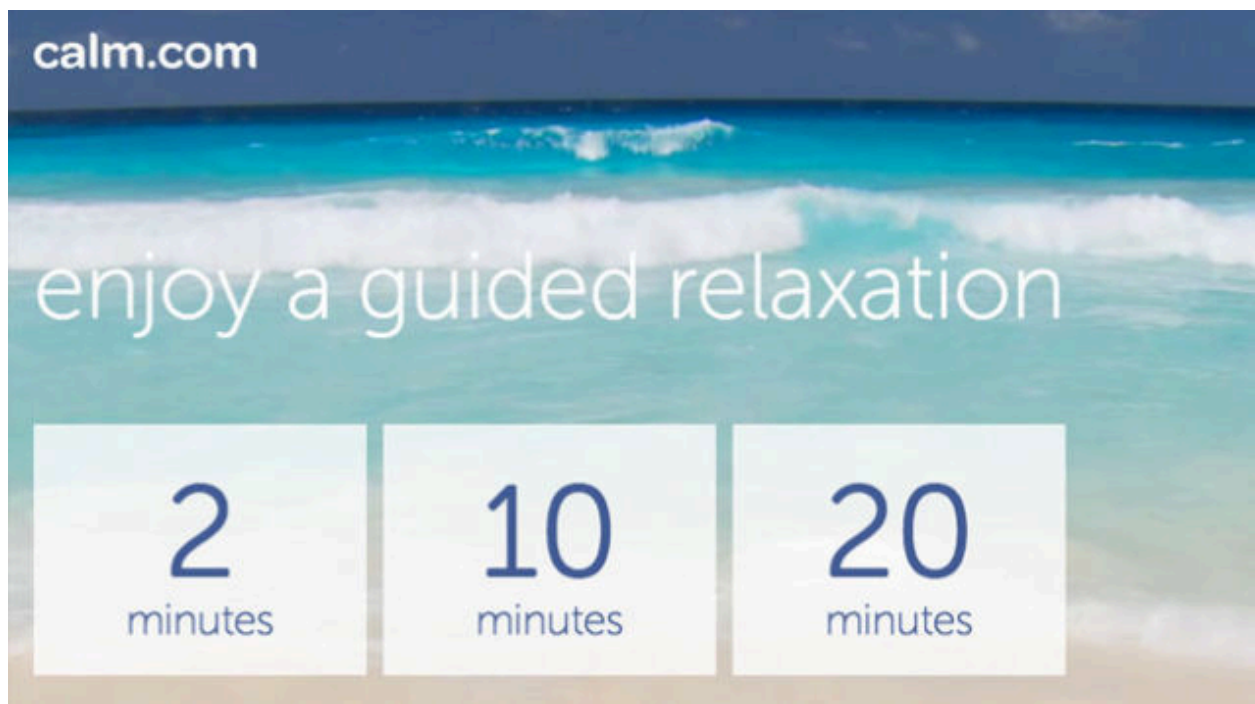
© 2014 by Beyond BookSmart. All rights reserved.

possible, at the expense of a good night's sleep. They may tell themselves they are stupid if they are struggling with their work. They may delay starting their work because they perceive it as boring or too difficult. They may dislike a particular teacher, and as a result disengage from that class altogether.

Luckily, as Executive Function coaches, we have some time-tested tools and strategies to help students build those critical emotional regulation skills.

1) Find the Calm

When test anxiety rears its gnarly head (or when any other type of anxious feelings interfere with learning or performance), we love the free app Calm.com. Both students and adults report that the guided meditations, soothing music, and beautiful nature images help quell anxiousness and leave them feeling refreshed and focused. Some students put on their headphones and start their day with a 10 minute meditation on the way to school, or do a quick 2 minute meditation before sitting down to homework. It's free. It's easy (no yoga gear to squeeze into). It's effective.



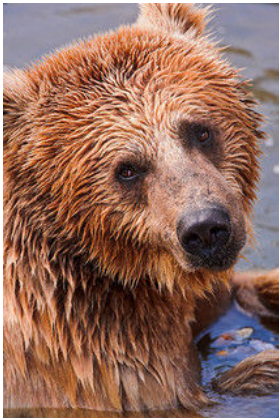
2) Clear the air

When students have difficulty engaging with certain hated topics (math misery, anyone?) or teachers (“Mrs. Fowler is soooooo mean!”), we introduce a metaphorical air freshener called **Teacher B Gone** to help them learn how to tolerate a rotten situation.

With this strategy, we prompt students to consider that **they’ll be done with the teacher or class at the end of the year but must live with the grade they earn for the rest of their lives**. Sometimes, this dose of perspective (applied frequently) is enough to refocus a student on the bigger picture and longer time frame of middle school or high school, instead of the intense (and temporary) frustration of the moment.

Another strategy we employ to help students manage their dislike of a particular instructor is to give them homework to come up with 5 things they **do** like about the teacher in question. This encourages students to abandon all-or-nothing, black and white thinking in favor of a more nuanced understanding that there are positive and negative aspects to all of us. It also changes the focus from a mindset intent at looking for unfavorable features in a teacher to actively seeking the opposite. We have seen that a guided exploration of those 5 “likes” (or even 1 if that’s all they can muster) can lead to a subtle shift in students’ ability to tolerate a less-than-perfect fit between a teacher and a student.

photo credit: [Robert S. Donovan](#)



3) Face the facts

If students are overwhelmed when faced with lengthy, complex, high-stakes assignments, it helps to step back and analyze the situation. Our **Size Up The Bear** strategy helps to disengage the panic and engage the frontal lobes in coolly assessing what the task really entails. No hyperbole (“It will take a million years!” “This is impossible!”). Just the facts.

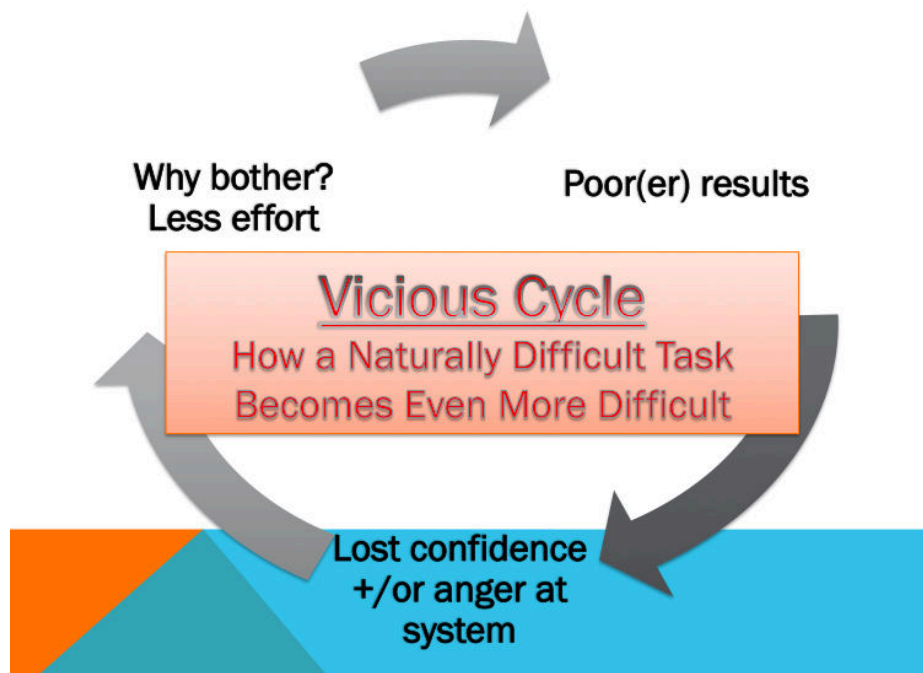
First, we ask the student to paraphrase and explain the instructions (so we can check for understanding). Then, we ask the student to rate how hard he thinks each element will be, using a 3 or 5 point rating scale. Finally, we assist the student in assigning time estimates for each part. This strategy is the first step to more formal planning using a calendar and setting goal dates for completion of specific tasks. Its goal is to emphasize a clear-headed approach that relies on an accurate assessment of the situation.

photo credit: [Tambako The Jaguar](#)

4) Break the cycle

When students look unmotivated or lazy, oftentimes it's a result of their lack of confidence in their ability to succeed. This creates a vicious cycle of failure. It starts with a deficit in a particular skill; let's say writing, for example. They lack strategies to tackle a particular writing assignment, so they may waste time with inefficient and ineffective approaches. They receive a poor grade and become angry over their wasted effort or upset with a teacher's "unreasonable" expectations. They lose confidence in themselves as students, and see the skill deficit as an unchangeable characteristic ("I'm a lousy writer and I always will be."). They expend less effort in writing assignments because they see failure as a foregone conclusion. And of course, given their lack of effort, they receive grades that confirm their belief that they are poor writers.

We show students this graphic representation below of the Vicious Cycle, to help them recognize why they may feel stuck.

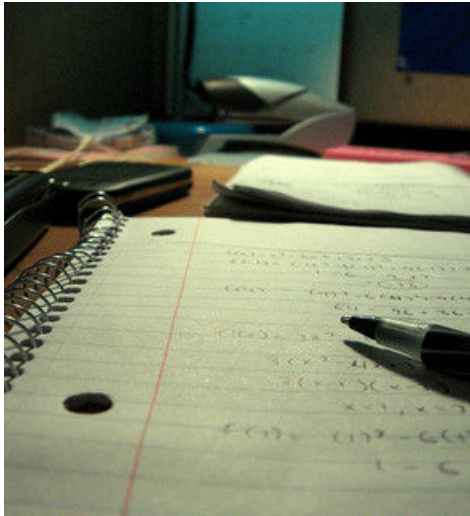


It can help to make an analogy with another non-academic skill that the particular student has. Perhaps they play baseball or the piano or can assemble an IKEA bookcase in 20 minutes. Ask them to recall what it was like the first time they tried these activities. How did they improve?

As coaches, we have found **the key to breaking the Vicious Cycle is by first helping the student to achieve a small success.** With writing, it may be introducing a tool such as Webspiration that helps create outlines. When the student sees he can do a portion of a previously impossible task, he gains a bit of confidence and is then more willing to invest further effort in developing a skill.

5) Plan for the tough stuff

Sometimes procrastination is a simple case of “I’d rather not do that Biology lab report right now.



My fantasy football league is way more fun.” But sometimes those delay tactics mask a dread of the work itself. We use the mantra “**Worst First**” to help students understand that **the most loathsome challenges require the most energy and focus**. If, for instance, math is your least favorite subject, it makes no sense to leave your calculus homework for 11:00pm, after you’ve written an essay on *The Great Gatsby*, completed a Spanish packet, and taken notes on the French Revolution. Leaving the hardest work for the end of the day makes it more dreaded, sucks up energy while doing other jobs, makes you more likely to skip it altogether, and leaves you without the necessary resources to do well on it if you do go for it, virtually ensuring failure and reinforcing the belief that the task is impossible.

photo credit: [Amy Loves Yah](#)

When Emotional Regulation is a Bigger Concern

Finally, while Executive Function coaches can help students with typical (and temporary) emotional regulation difficulties to manage their schoolwork with strategies like these, we are not trained psychotherapists, nor are we a substitute for this type of therapy. Students with more substantial or pervasive emotional regulation challenges may require the support of a qualified therapist as well as a coach in order to make gains in their Executive Function skills. Consult with your pediatrician to determine the best ways to support your child’s individual needs.

[Click here](#) for a free consultation about Executive Function coaching to help support your child with emotional regulation.