

# childPSYCH News

A newsletter for professionals and parents

## Inside this issue:

<b>Emotional Development in Children</b>	<b>1, 2</b>
<b>"the sky must have fallen"</b>	<b>2</b>

We're on the web  
[www.childpsych.net.au](http://www.childpsych.net.au)

## Special points of interest:

At *childpsych* only psychologists who are registered teachers and/or Educational Psychologists will write the report on learning difficulties

All *childpsych* psychologists are trained as specialist psychologists

To unsubscribe from this newsletter at any time, either email or call *childpsych*

## Emotional Development in Children

A significant number of children and adolescents are referred for psychological therapy because of problems with emotions. Emotional regulation refers to the ability to adequately control our own emotional responses and is an essential aspect of child development.

If emotional regulation proves difficult, it can significantly impact on a child's ability to control their behavior as well as their general psychological well-being. Emotional regulation is a developmental process that occurs in stages (which are outlined below). It is influenced by biological factors such as temperamental differences in the ability to self-regulate. Indeed most parents will know that some babies are easier to comfort than others. It is also affected by cognitive learning, such as language development, and the social environment, for example how family members talk about and regulate their own emotions.

### The Developmental Process

Emotional development increases over the first few years of life from early signs of happiness in response to human recognition at 6-weeks of age, expressions of sadness and anger following removal of a toy at 4-months of age, and fear following separation of an attachment figure at 9-months of age.

The frequency of anger expression, or the 'terrible twos,' reaches a peak at age 2 before it starts to gradually



**Over the next 3-4 years a child's emotional regulatory system starts to mature**

decrease. Over the next 3-4 years a child's emotional regulatory system starts to mature and they take greater responsibility for their own emotional functioning. School age children should be increasingly able to verbalise when they are angry and not act on these feelings by hitting or exploding. They should also be able to express impatience by not whining but waiting, and excitement by not running in circles but talking about it. More advanced emotional regulation skills are reflected by a child's ability to hide socially unacceptable emotions (such as boys not crying when hurt).

Once emotional regulation skills are established in the early years, they are again challenged during adolescence. This is a development stage marked by emotional upheaval and hormonal change. Emotions are once again experienced more intensely and frequently and it may seem as if the adolescent has regressed to the emotional functioning of a preschool child!

### Assessment

Some children's self-regulatory systems develop more slowly than others. When a child is ex-

periencing intense episodes of emotional expression that they find difficult to modulate, and which seem inappropriate according to their age and developmental stage, a more formal psychological assessment may be needed. This assessment will explore whether their emotional regulation is delayed in comparison to their age and developmental stage, the impact of the problem at home, at school, on relationships in general and self-esteem. A comprehensive assessment will also establish whether such difficulties are symptomatic of an underlying 'diagnosable disorder' such as anxiety, depression or conduct disorder and triggered by a stressful incident (as this can cause regression).

### Treatment for Emotional Dysregulation at *childpsych*

When problems with emotional dysregulation are not compounded by a diagnosable disorder, improvements can be seen in as few as 4-6 sessions of individual therapy. The therapies most commonly used are cognitive behaviour therapy and behavior therapy, although play therapy techniques are often drawn upon to facilitate learning and make the sessions more fun!

Initial treatment sessions tend to focus on emotional literacy, aiming to increase the child's understanding of different emotions and how they experience them. Rec-

Continue over ...

CHILDPSYCH:PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE

4 / 671 Sherwood Road  
Sherwood Q 4075

DIRECTOR: PHILIP O. GOSSCHALK MAPS

Phone / Fax: 07 3716 0445  
Email: admin@childpsych.net.au


childpsych  
PSYCHOLOGY PRACTICE

**They're the most  
important thing  
in your life  
and sometimes they need our help**

"it has been found that children with a wider emotional vocabulary are better able to regulate the more corrosive emotions such as anger."

## New Group Program



Learn social competence  
8 session program  
For ages 5-12

**Enrol Now 3716 0445**

See our website for more  
information

[www.childpsych.net.au](http://www.childpsych.net.au)

Emotions con't

ognizing early stages of emotions such as anger is essential to its effective management. Establishing safe ways of getting rid of 'intense' emotions and learning to manage physiological arousal by use of relaxation techniques are also commonly part of the treatment process. For children older than 5 they are able to comprehend that emotions are an outcome of thinking processes and therefore can be managed by changing the way we think. Positive self-talk such as 'keep calm' and 'I can handle this' are used as replacement thoughts to facilitate coping. The role of parents in reinforcing and modeling effective regulation skills is also essential to the treatment outcome, as children frequently use their parents as a social-referencing tool.

### What Parents Can Do...

Emotions are an integral part of being human and children's emotional outbursts are often not intentional. To help your child identify with their emotional turmoil it is important to identify and validate the emotion expressed for example: 'I recognise that you are feeling angry and frustrated however it is important that you do what I ask.' As a child's language skills develop they are more able to use their words to communicate their emotions. Indeed it has been found that children with a wider emotional vocabulary are better able to regulate the more corrosive emotions such as anger. Given this, talking freely about your own emotions is hugely beneficial as is encouraging your child to talk about their feelings. This can be incorporated into a range of daily activities such as discussing what someone is feeling by their body language on the TV or in magazines. Finally, providing children with a safe place or 'sanctuary' to go when they are experiencing intense emotions, such as a

## "the sky must have fallen"

You may remember the fable of Chicken Licken who thought the sky had fallen in when an acorn landed on his head. Some children have a tendency to think the sky is falling in most of the time. These children tend to be negative and pessimistic and grow up to be adults we describe as "half glass empty". As psychologists we are aware that such children are at risk of depression so early intervention is important.

So what can be done? Do we put these children through self-esteem programs or teach positive thinking? In fact the answer is neither. Research suggests that neither of these help to significantly reduce the rate of depression. Telling our children that everything will be all right or that they can achieve whatever they want poorly prepares them for the real world where they will eventually face failure at some point. Instead we need to teach children how to think rationally. Rational thinking is about being realistic and accepting the truth even when it is painful.

Rational thinking is a process of testing our thoughts and putting our emotional reactions into perspective. In its simplest form, rational thinking for children aged eight or older involves making a list of reasons why the thought is true and then another list of reasons why the thought may not be true. These reasons need to be based on facts. This is a process you can take

space within their bedroom with relaxing toys and music, or encouraging them to get rid of their adrenalin by doing something energetic are strategies that can be used.

**by Siobain Bonfield**  
Staff Clinical Psychologist at  
*childpsych*

your child through. First have your child (or adolescent) write down their irrational thought, then give a rating out of 10 about how strongly they believe the thought. For example if your child is catastrophising that a storm will destroy your home, ask them how much they believe the storm will destroy the house. Then have them discuss what proof they have the storm will destroy your home. They may say such things as



they know that storms can destroy homes and they have seen it on television. After they have listed the reasons why their thought may

be correct, have them list reasons why their thought may be incorrect. Reasons such as "we've had lots of storms and our house is okay" and "we're having a storm now and the house is not shaking" are examples. Then have your child think about these facts and ask them how much they believe the irrational thought now out of 10. More often than not, the score is lower suggesting the child is now thinking more rationally. Rational thinking is based on cognitive therapy, an approach we use in our practice regularly and has received considerable research support for treating depression and anxiety.

So if Chicken Licken had not panicked when the acorn fell on his head, he would have realised that the sky was not falling in and it was only an acorn falling down!

**by Phillip Gosschalk**  
Director of *childpsych*

