

Promoting Social Regulation

Identifying emotional states and utilizing strategies to achieve social emotional success

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"I used to 'make a scene' when something upset me. I have been told so many times to 'calm down' and it never worked. That's why I like social groups. It teaches you how to control yourself."

-Perry, a 3rd grade student with social regulation challenges

Perry, like so many who struggle to regulate themselves, are often told to use tools such as sensory supports or deep breathing when "making a scene". Without teaching how to read the social demands and how this type of behavior affects the people around them, this type of support is more of a band-aid than a long-term solution. As we look at our students' meaningful occupations, including play and socializing, it is important to ask ourselves, "How many of them are struggling due to a challenge with regulating their emotions, impulses and sensory needs given the demands of the social context they are in?"

When asking ourselves this question, we must recognize that social skills and self-regulation go hand in hand. If we are unable to control our internal state and/or overt behaviors in order to adapt to various social demands, we will have minimal success in social situations. People may label this as being "non-compliant," "disruptive," "hyper," "anxious," "inflexible," or "lazy." These labels point to a deficit in what we refer to as social regulation, or the ability to adjust ones' level of alertness and modify how emotions and behaviors are revealed in order to achieve social goals. We feel that since we are so often sharing space with others, we cannot view self-regulation and social learning as separate.



Leah reviewing the emotions that fall in the different zones

Skills Needed For Social Regulation

Social regulation may seem simple; however, it is vast and complex. It is important to understand that maladaptive "behavior" stems from an inability to cope in adaptive ways when faced with a stressor that outstrips one's capacity. Many neurologically rooted skills need to be integrated, including the following:

- Sensory processing and modulation
- Emotional regulation
- Executive functioning
- Language processing
- Pragmatic language
- Perspective taking and social cognition
- Central coherence

Understanding all of the areas involved provides guidance in determining treatment approaches and skill building in the areas of

need. Given the complexity of social regulation, using an interdisciplinary approach to address the underlying deficits is most effective in developing and generalizing skills.

The Zones of Regulation

The Zones of Regulation® is a curriculum designed to address many of these underlying deficits in order to improve self-regulation and social success. The Zones teaches students to recognize when moving towards a less regulated state and increases awareness of triggers, physiological states and emotions. Additionally, students reflect on how their actions impact outcomes, thus increasing social cognition about how those around them think and feel as a result of their behavior and metacognition in measuring their success in reaching goals. Lastly, students learn when and how to use a variety of tools.

The Zones uses a systematic, cognitive behavior approach to teach self-regulation by categorizing all the different ways we feel and states of alertness we experience into four concrete zones.

The **Red Zone** is used to describe extremely heightened states of alertness and intense emotions. A person may be elated or experiencing anger, rage, explosive behavior, devastation, or terror when in the Red Zone. A person is described as “out of control” if in the Red Zone.

The **Yellow Zone** is also used to describe slightly heightened states of alertness and elevated emotions; however, one has some control when they are in the Yellow Zone. A person may be experiencing stress, frustration, anxiety, excitement, silliness, the wiggles, or nervousness when in the Yellow Zone.

The **Green Zone** is used to describe a calm state of alertness. A person may be described as happy, focused, content, or ready to learn when in the Green Zone. This is the Zone students

predominantly need to be in the classroom.

The **Blue Zone** is used to describe low states of alertness, such as when one feels sad, tired, sick, or bored.

The Zones curriculum includes 18 lessons that embed evidence based practices (such as role playing and video modeling, self-monitoring and visual supports) into the various learning activities to teach the fundamental skills needed to self-regulate. Learning activities are broken up by age groups, some targeting children in preschool through early elementary years, and others aimed at upper-elementary age students through adults.

Practice and Implementation

Students are taught self-awareness of how various emotions look and feel, by labeling physiological cues in photographs

or videos. Equally important, students use various mediums to improve their ability to recognize various emotions on others, for example, playing charades, watching video clips, making magazine collages, exploring characters’ social cues in children’s literature, and participating in Zones Bingo.

To reflect on how they may have influenced those around them think or feel about them during different parts of their day; as well as, to look at the big picture and how their ability to regulate affected the successfulness of their day and when and where a tool may have been beneficial to aid in regulation, students graph their Zones (feelings and states) over the course of a day.

Lessons from Michelle Garcia Winner’s, Think Social! curriculum are interwoven into The Zones book to further address teaching how our behaviors impact those around us and helping us determine which Zone is expected, given the social demands.

“Social skills and self-regulation go hand in hand. If we are unable to control our internal state and/or overt behaviors in order to adapt to various social demands, we will have minimal success in social situations. People may label this as being non-compliant, disruptive, hyper, anxious, inflexible, or lazy. These labels point to a deficit in what we call social regulation.”



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To help students understand events that cause them to move toward less regulated states, students brainstorm all of their “triggers” and are taught to use caution when approaching them. Students explore various tools, including breathing strategies such as Lazy 8 Breaths, sensory supports and thinking strategies to determine if the strategy is helpful in regulating their emotions and states. For example, Stop, Opt & GO is a thinking tool and visual support which helps student stop before their act, consider all their options (both good and bad) and go with the best one. This tool not only helps students in moving to a more expected Zone, but also teaches problem solving skills, impulse control and using foresight to predict outcomes.

Additional Supports

There are several other curricula, strategies and resources that can be used in conjunction with The Zones to improve social regulation. Perry, the student quoted above, also benefited from participating in therapeutic activities and learning concepts

integrated from the following books: Whole Body Listening Larry at School, You Are a Social Detective, and The Incredible 5 Point Scale, all cognitive behavioral-based books geared toward children to help teach social regulation concepts. Supporting our students to be efficient social regulators allows children to enjoy playing with friends, adolescents to successfully navigate peer and academic stressors while coming of age, and adults to maintain jobs and lasting relationships.

Elizabeth Sautter is the co-director/owner of Communication Works. She is a licensed and certified speech-language pathologist who has been working with clients and their families since 1996. She is experienced in the areas of autism, developmental disabilities, social cognitive deficits, and challenging behaviors. Elizabeth has worked with individuals ranging from preschoolers to adults in private practice, schools, and hospitals.

Leah Kuypers a licensed and certified occupational therapist who has worked since 1999 in school and clinical settings, specializing in sensory processing disorder, motor coordination and self-regulation needs. She is the author of “The Zones of Regulation”, an evidence based curriculum designed to help clients learn strategies to self-regulate their sensory needs and emotions.

Workshops and training on the Zones of Regulation Curriculum as well as therapy incorporating the above curriculum are offered by Communication Works located in Oakland. For more information, visit www.cwtherapy.com

Resources:

The Zones of Regulation®: A Curriculum Designed to Foster Self-Regulation and Emotional Control (2011). By Leah Kuypers.

Whole Body Listening Larry at School (2011). By Elizabeth Sautter and Kristen Wilson.

You are a Social Detective (2008). By Michelle Garcia Winner and Pamela Crooke.

The Incredible 5 Point Scale (2003) Kari Dunn Buron and Mitzi Curtis.

The Explosive Child (2010). By Ross Greene.