

<https://studentwellbeinghub.edu.au/educators/starting-school/>

Emotions and behaviour

Emotions impact student behaviour in a range of ways. Young children on the autism spectrum are still learning to notice and recognise their emotions, so they need more support to manage their emotions and behaviour. Challenging behaviours tend to occur when young children are not coping with their emotions or when they become overwhelmed by what they are being expected to do or the demands of the environment. This means that the way people are communicating with them can either support a student or increase their stress and distress. Sensory experiences can range from enjoyable to highly distressing for young children, even when they are not able to name how they feel.

Something to really keep at the forefront of your mind is understanding that children do the best they can, when they can – they're not intentionally, for example, engaging in challenging behaviours. There's always a reason for behaviour.

— Associate Professor Josephine Barbaro, Director of Identification and Diagnosis, Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre, La Trobe University

Video: Understanding emotions and behaviour of autistic children

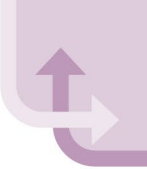
What are emotions?

Emotions tend to be related to experiences, social needs and personal wants. Emotions are complex brain and body states that involve three distinct responses:

- An experience results in body and brain responses usually followed by an expressive response (behaviour).
- The body and brain response is what we normally call an emotion. For example, if something happens that makes someone happy, that feeling of happiness is signalled to the person through their body and brain responses.
- The body's chemical reaction in most people will typically be the same but the body responses are more individual, with no two people feeling any one emotion exactly the same way. One person may feel happiness in their face and stomach, while another may feel it in their hands and face.

What is spoon theory and how can it help me understand my students?

Spoon theory has become a very useful way of talking about energy levels, mindful body awareness and self-regulation. As described by [Christine Miserandino](#), you can think about how much energy you have across the day in terms of the number of 'spoons' you have. If you start the day with 12 spoons, how many spoons will it take to enter a busy school playground or participate in a classroom activity? Those are the sort of questions we ask when we think about how to approach strategies of self-regulation. Once someone has used all their spoons for the day, they often end up overwhelmed, which can present as survival behaviours. Individuals can



regain spoons by doing activities based on their interests, and engaging in preferred sensory activities.

Spoon theory can be used to help educators appreciate the different challenges and limitations that individual students may face, especially those with chronic illnesses or disability. By understanding spoon theory, teachers can better support and accommodate these students, and help create a more inclusive and understanding classroom environment.

What experiences might stress, distress or overwhelm a child at school?

Children – like most people – can become more stressed, distressed or overwhelmed when they are unwell, tired or hungry. For children on the autism spectrum, stress, distress or overwhelming experiences at school can be a problem. If a student is not able to recognise when they are becoming stressed, distressed or overwhelmed, they cannot take steps to calm down or self-regulate, potentially resulting in behaviours that are governed by their emotional brain or their survival brain. If children enter into survival mode repeatedly, this can alter their brain chemistry, resulting in even more dysregulated behaviours.

Triggers can include:

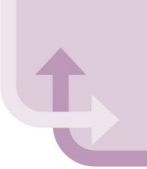
- unexpected changes in routine or environment
- unexpected transitions or being asked to transition to another activity or task before the child has finished what they are currently doing
- sensory overload in loud, bright or cluttered settings
- difficulty with social interactions and communication
- overstimulation from technology or screens
- unfamiliar or challenging activities or tasks
- unfamiliar people or places, stress or distress due to a lack of object permanence leading the student to worry that their family, home or belongings no longer exist
- limited access to sensory or emotional regulation tools or resources
- unmet support needs in any area of functioning.

It is important to recognise that a student's response may have been caused by a series of events, which may have started before they arrived at school, that have collectively built up resulting in what is sometimes called a 'meltdown'. A student may not be aware or able to articulate the reason for their emotions or behaviours.

Working in partnership with the family to develop an understanding of a student's triggers means that you can notice the signs that emotions or behaviours are escalating. You can then help the student by supporting them to regulate their emotions before they are overwhelmed.

Establishing a way that you and the family can share information about a student's emotional state at the start and end of the school day will help you both plan the support required accordingly.

Video: How can educators support autistic students in the classroom by understanding their behaviour?



What is self-regulation and how can that help my students?

Self-regulation refers to the ability to manage one's thoughts, emotions and behaviours to achieve goals and maintain wellbeing. By developing self-regulation skills, students can better manage distractions, overcome obstacles and control their impulses. This, in turn, can lead to improved academic performance, increased resilience and enhanced overall wellbeing. To support the development of self-regulation in students, teachers can provide opportunities for developing and improving interoceptive awareness, learning about emotions and emotional expression, and model self-regulatory strategies themselves.

Interoceptive awareness or mindful body awareness activities can be structured into a school day in the morning session, after recess and after lunch to ensure children are ready to learn. These times of transition in the day are also when students are most likely to be dysregulated and struggling to settle. Regularly doing these activities will support children to recognise, understand and manage their emotions at school and develop self-regulation. Find a range of interoception activities for the early years, and more information on how to implement these into classrooms in the Student Wellbeing Hub's [Brain Break Bops](#) and [Get ready to learn](#) resources.



Conducting mindfulness activities at different times in the school day will help students to be calm and engage with learning.

Strategies to support self-regulation when emotions or behaviours are escalating

The following are general strategies only – they may not be suitable responses for all students in all circumstances.

- Allow for unscheduled time during the day for the student to take a break, allowing them to do something they are interested in and that makes them feel calm, safe and happy. Breaks in themselves provide a distraction, which may be enough to support students to calm down. However, if students are highly stressed or in panic mode, a break may not be enough to allow them to neurologically and biologically calm down.
- Provide a quiet and calm space for the student to retreat to that is their 'safe space' (noting that the student should be visible to you at all times).
- Encourage sensory regulation activities such as wearing headphones, deep breathing, stretching, stimming or fidgeting.
- Encourage physical activity, such as going for a walk or playing outside.
- Create a visual schedule or countdown to help the child understand when a break is coming.

- Give them some time and space to relax, limiting conversation and interactions from others as much as possible.



Creating a calm space creates a retreat from the bustle of classroom activity.