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## Supporting Children's Strong Emotions During COVID-19

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### INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with the "Supporting Children to Manage Their Emotions" professional development webinar from the University of Virginia. The questions and activities in this handout could be used in a work session (e.g., professional learning community, professional development session), for individual coaching, or for self-reflection.

### Goals

- ◆ Understand the importance of supporting children's strong emotions before *and* while they're experiencing them.
- ◆ Explore intentional teaching practices to support children's strong emotions in any learning format (fully virtual, hybrid, or physically distant/in-person).
- ◆ Reflect on your current practice, including your biases and connections with families, and plan to use concrete strategies to support children's strong emotions before and while they're experiencing them.

### Activity

- ◆ Listen to the webinar. This webinar is a production of the University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development, narrated by Caitlin Powell, Early Childhood Project Associate, and Stephanie Adams, STREAMin<sup>3</sup> Curriculum coach.
- ◆ After listening to the webinar, use the questions below to guide your reflection and create an action plan to use strategies to support children's strong emotions.

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**"Breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile."**

**Thich Nhat Hanh, Zen Master**

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## REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ What caught your attention from the webinar? What made that fact, excerpt, or example meaningful to you?
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- ◆ Each child and family will support their children's strong emotions in different ways. Connecting with families to learn how they support big emotions at home can help us to better understand and support each child.
    1. How do you already connect with families around this topic?
    2. What is one way you can expand on your current communication to deepen your understanding and support for their child's development of this skill?
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- ◆ In the webinar, Caitlin Powell notes that sometimes children display challenging behaviors when they're experiencing strong emotions. This may look like purposeful acting out, but in reality, children are expressing their feelings the only way they know how. Research shows that teachers' explicit and implicit biases influence how they interpret children's behaviors, which has led to higher rates of exclusion, suspension, and expulsion for black children, in particular. Explicit and implicit biases can also impact the way that teachers interpret and respond to children's strong emotions, especially when children demonstrate challenging behavior.
    1. What biases do you hold that influence the way you respond to children's strong emotions? How are your responses to specific groups of children different?
    2. In light of this awareness of your biases, how can you ensure that you're positively and effectively supporting every child's strong emotions?
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- ◆ Virtual, hybrid, and physically distant learning adds a new barrier to supporting children's strong emotions. The webinar outlines three effective practices:
  - Acknowledge and accept strong emotions
  - Use calm-down techniques
  - Connect to children
  1. Assess each child on your roster and how they manage their emotions. Who may benefit from more support? What trends do you see across your children?
  2. Assess your current practice. How and when do you teach children to manage their strong emotions? Are you being proactive or reactive? How do you respond to children's strong emotions while they're happening? What's working that you can expand upon?
  3. Based on the needs of the children in your classroom and your current practice, plan for specific ways to use these practices to support children's strong emotions. How will you modify to support and meet each child where they are? *Examples provided on the last page.*
  4. Regularly check in on your plan, assess its impact on children, and adjust as needed.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Learn more about how COVID-19 adaptations may be affecting children's emotions:

- ◆ **Source:** VCU Autism Center
- ◆ **Webinar:** "A Day in the Life: Supporting Emotional Regulation in Difficult Times"
- ◆ **Link:** <https://vcuautismcenter.org/earlychildhood/families/covid/>
- ◆ **Description:** A webinar to support children with ASD to label, communicate, and cope with the powerful emotions they may be experiencing due to COVID-19.



- ◆ **Source:** Sesame Street Caring For Each Other Initiative
- ◆ **Infographic:** "Soothing & Comforting"
- ◆ **Link:** [https://cdn.sesamestreet.org/sites/default/files/media\\_folders/Images/PDF1V3.pdf?\\_ga=2.204433176.924452794.1604004948-1716376387.1603372632](https://cdn.sesamestreet.org/sites/default/files/media_folders/Images/PDF1V3.pdf?_ga=2.204433176.924452794.1604004948-1716376387.1603372632)
- ◆ **Description:** An infographic to help children understand COVID-19 and the emotions they may be experiencing due to the pandemic.



### ACKNOWLEDGE AND ACCEPT STRONG EMOTIONS

- ◆ **Make it OK to express strong emotions** - Help children understand that everyone has strong emotions at times by incorporating learning opportunities before emotions occur into your classroom. For example, use books or puppets, or role play to show that it is okay to feel any feelings.
- ◆ **Validate emotions** - When a child is feeling a strong emotion, validate that emotion by narrating what they look like and how they might be feeling, e.g. "I see you are standing by the door and have tears on your cheeks. It looks like you might be worried Papa isn't here yet."
- ◆ **Offer comfort and support** - As children experience strong emotions, offer support and remind them that you are there to help. This might look different for each child, so remember to offer support based on their individual needs in that moment.



### USE CALM DOWN TECHNIQUES

- ◆ **Deep breathing** - Practice deep breathing techniques prior to strong emotions to help children gain the skills and confidence to use them when they are feeling strong emotions. For example, teach children how to use the turtle technique, and then when they are upset, help guide them through this familiar strategy.
- ◆ **Tense and loosen muscles** - Guide children through exercises where they tense and loosen muscles, this helps bring awareness to how their body might feel as their emotions shift.
- ◆ **Shake it out** - With or without music, encourage children to shake out their arms, legs, etc. This can help reduce tension they feel.
- ◆ **Calm down spot** - Have a designated spot where children can go to calm down if they are feeling strong emotions. This spot should feel comfortable and can have visuals on breathing techniques, emotion faces, etc. Teach children how to use this spot prior to strong emotions, so they know where they can go when they need to focus on calming their bodies.



### CONNECT TO CHILDREN

- ◆ **Become an external regulator** - Regulating strong emotions is challenging and children will need support from a trusted adult to help them. Help children learn the skills necessary, and then work with families to help them learn ways to accept and support strong emotions.
- ◆ **Provide supports for children** - Remembering to use calm down strategies in the moment can be challenging, so providing visual supports for children can help them. For example, after teaching the turtle technique, you can have the children make individual turtles to use in moments when they need extra support.

### CHECK-IN ON YOUR PLAN

- ◆ **Set a reminder!** Build in time bi-weekly to check in on your relationships with each child and consider how you've been using these practices. If they aren't working, consider why and ways to adapt.
- ◆ **Find a buddy!** Sharing goals with a co-worker and checking in with each other can help keep us all on track.
- ◆ **Keep a journal** and make a quick entry when you try out a new practice. Note how the children react.
- ◆ **Record yourself** (live or video) and observe your interactions with children. Take note of how often you use these practices and how children react.