

Understanding Regulation

The Calming Stairs Framework
Trauma-Informed Support for Families



Overview

This guide explains how children’s nervous systems develop, how stress and trauma affect regulation, and why connection must always come before correction.

Many children struggle not because they are “naughty” or “defiant”, but because their nervous systems are overwhelmed and unsafe.

Understanding these foundations helps adults respond with confidence, clarity, and compassion – even in difficult moments.

In This Guide You Will Learn:

- What regulation really means for children
- How stress affects thinking, behaviour, and learning
- Why trauma and SEN impact emotional control
- How adults create safety and calm.
- Practical ways to support regulation every day



What Is Regulation?

Regulation is the ability to manage emotional, physical, and sensory experiences in a way that helps a child feel safe, connected, and ready to learn.

Children are not born with this skill. It develops slowly through repeated experiences of being comforted, understood, and supported by safe adults.

Regulation grows through relationships – not through rewards, punishments, or consequences.

Key Points

- Regulation develops through co-regulation with adults
- Stress blocks access to thinking and problem-solving
- A calm adult helps a child become calm
- Safety always comes before learning
- Behaviour reflects nervous system state, not character



How Stress Affects Thinking, Behaviour and Learning.

When a child feels unsafe, anxious, overwhelmed, or under pressure, their brain moves into survival mode.

In this state, the brain's priority becomes protection, not learning. Thinking clearly, remembering rules, managing emotions, and making good choices become much harder.

This is why children may seem to “forget” skills, lose control, or behave impulsively when they are distressed. They are not choosing to behave this way – their nervous system is doing its best to cope.

What This Looks Like in Everyday Life

- Difficulty listening or following instructions
- Sudden emotional outbursts or shutdown
- Struggling to concentrate or remember tasks
- Increased anxiety, avoidance, or resistance
- Regression in behaviour or learning skills
- Appearing “defiant” when actually overwhelmed



Why Trauma and SEN Impact Emotional Control

Children who have experienced trauma, loss, neglect, or early instability often develop heightened stress responses. Their nervous systems learn to stay alert for danger, even when they are safe.

Similarly, many children with special educational needs experience sensory overload, communication difficulties, and chronic stress, which can make emotional regulation much harder. Over time, this constant pressure affects how the brain develops. Emotional control, impulse management, and flexible thinking may be delayed – not because of ability, but because of prolonged stress.

Common Challenges for These Children

- Strong reactions to small triggers
- Difficulty calming down after distress
- Heightened anxiety or fear responses
- Sensory sensitivities or overwhelm
- Struggles with transitions and change
- Feeling unsafe even in supportive environments



How Adults Create Safety and Calm

Children learn to regulate their emotions through the relationships around them. When adults stay calm, predictable, and emotionally available, a child's nervous system begins to feel safe. This sense of safety allows the brain to move out of survival mode and into learning and connection. A regulated adult becomes the anchor that helps a child feel steady, understood, and supported.

What this means in practise

- Children borrow calm from the adults around them
- A steady voice and body help reduce stress
- Predictable routines increase feelings of safety
- Emotional availability builds trust and security
- Repair after conflict strengthens relationships
- Calm responses teach self-regulation over time



Practical Ways to Support Regulation Every Day

Supporting regulation does not require perfection or specialist equipment. It comes from small, consistent actions that help children feel safe, understood, and supported. When adults respond with calm, structure, and empathy, children learn that their feelings can be managed and that they are not alone in difficult moments. These everyday strategies build resilience over time.

What this means in practise

- Offering comfort before correction
- Keeping routines predictable and clear
- Using calm, simple language
- Allowing time and space to calm down
- Noticing and responding to early stress signs
- Modelling healthy emotional responses



Bringing It All Together

Understanding regulation helps adults see behaviour differently.

When children feel safe, supported, and understood, their nervous systems can begin to settle and develop healthy emotional control. Through calm relationships, predictable routines, and compassionate responses, children learn that their feelings are manageable and that they are not alone. Regulation is not taught through rules – it is built through connection.

What This Guide Aims to Support

- A deeper understanding of children's behaviour
- Greater confidence in responding to distress
- Stronger relationships built on safety and trust
- Reduced conflict and emotional overwhelm
- Long-term emotional resilience
- A calmer, more connected family life

