

How Big is the Feeling? - Zones of Regulation

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The first stage of emotional intelligence is emotional literacy:

- teaching your child the vocabulary of the four basic emotions (sad, mad, glad, scared)
- helping them notice how they're feeling and give them words to understand that: "I see your eyes are big, and you're rubbing your hands together – it looks like you're worried."
- helping them notice and describe other people's emotions

Once they have those basics, then we can move on to learning appropriate ways to express all those emotions, and eventually learning how to manage big feelings.

It is helpful for you to understand, and then to teach them, that there are different levels of emotions, and what they (and you) might need to do to manage them may depend on how big of a feeling they are having.

Some feelings are small and easy to ignore. Some are challenging but manageable. Some are so big they overwhelm us. When you teach your child words for feelings, help them understand how the words describe different levels of feelings.

Sad Feelings

Wistful
Disappointed
Regretful
Hurt
Grieving
Heartbroken

Mad Feelings

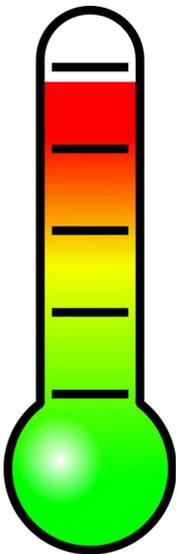
Miffed
Frustrated
Annoyed
Angry
Furious
Outraged

Glad Feelings

Content
Pleased
Cheerful
Happy
Excited
Ecstatic

Scared Feelings

Uncertain
Apprehensive
Worried
Anxious
Frightened
Terrified



Some children find a thermometer metaphor helpful. (You may need to first teach them what a real thermometer, then teach the metaphor.)

When they're generally feeling "fine", they're in the green zone. They're ready to learn, ready to play, ready to do things they need to do like put their shoes on or get ready for bed.

When feelings start to stir - they're disappointed, frustrated, or apprehensive - they're moving toward the yellow zone. They may be able to distract themselves with an activity, do calming self-talk, take a deep breath, or do a quick check-in with you to get back in the green zone.

When they notice feelings start to get bigger (orange zone) – they're hurt, angry, anxious, or overexcited – they may need you to remind them of coping tools to try: counting to ten, taking a break, going for a walk, asking for help.

If a child has escalated into a red zone (has "flipped their lid") and is feeling heartbroken, or outraged, or terrified, they will need an adult to help them to calm down. If they're in a meltdown, it won't work to "reason with them" or ask them to use their words. You'll just need to focus on helping them get back to calm, and talk it through later on when they're calm.

You might find it helpful to have a visual tool to work with –print out or draw a thermometer image so the child can point out where they're at on the thermometer. When you first teach this, you'll label where *you* think they are. Gradually, you'll ask them to tune into their own moods and describe how they're feeling. Our eventual goal is for them to notice themselves "heating up" and use soothing strategies to "cool down."

Another helpful tool is the “[Zones of Regulation](#)” by Leah Kuypers. This tool helps parents and children identify the feelings they’re having and the intensity of those feelings and ways to get back to calm.

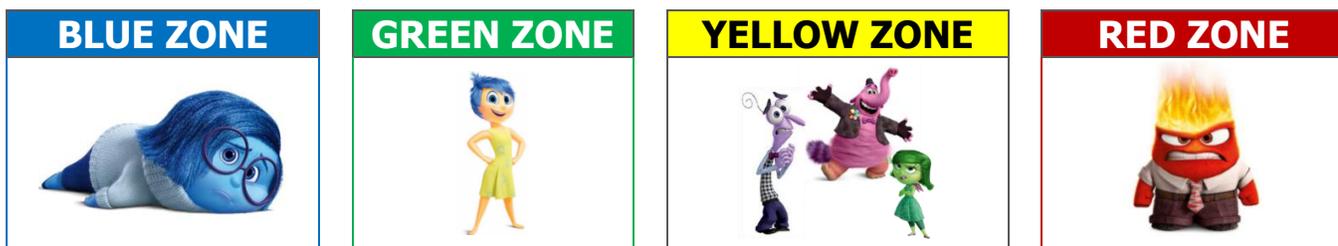
			
BLUE ZONE Sad Sick Tired Bored Moving Slowly	GREEN ZONE Happy Calm Feeling Okay Focused Ready to Learn	YELLOW ZONE Frustrated Worried Silly/Wiggly Excited Loss of Some Control	RED ZONE Mad/Angry Terrified Yelling/Hitting Elated Out of Control

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From *The Zones of Regulation*® by Leah M. Kuypers • Available at www.socialthinking.com

Blue is when their energy is dragged down – whether they are sick or tired or sad they may not be able to engage in play and learning till they get some support moving to the green zone. Green = ready to learn and play. When they start to escalate in any of the four feeling areas, that can distract them from learning and playing and getting things done. (In the mad category, a “frustrated” child is in the yellow zone, for scared, it’s a worried child, for glad, it may be silliness or excitement that is causing them to lose focus.) In the yellow zone, addressing those emotions can help them move back to the green. We want them to start noticing the subtler cues that they’re escalating up into yellow so they (and you) can help them to calm before they get anywhere near the red zone.

The red zone is when any feeling is so big the child is out of control and can’t manage those feelings. (Mad = outraged; Sad = distraught; Glad = elated / wild with excitement; Scared = Terrified.) They need help from an adult to calm down. They won’t be able to do it alone till they’re older.

Some parents compare the zones to characters from the movie Inside Out. (all images copyright Pixar.)



You can introduce this idea to your child just a little bit at a time. Help them notice when they’re starting to slip toward the blue zone or starting to escalate up to the yellow zone. When the feelings are still small, they are manageable. Work with your child to figure out in those times what helps them get back to green.

Once they’ve gained some understanding of the idea of Zones, you can use the Zones of Regulation worksheet to gather all these ideas into one place. It’s fine to work on it off and on over the course of many days. Help them to fill it out and teach them how to use it to start learning how to notice and regulate their emotions.

My Zones of Regulation – Sample for a Child Who Fills Out Their Own (age 5+)

	BLUE ZONE	GREEN ZONE	YELLOW ZONE	RED ZONE
How I look or act	<p>I sigh or pout</p> <p>I yawn, stretch, rub eyes</p> <p>I cry</p> <p>I move slowly and just want to rest</p>	<p>I sit up straight</p> <p>I look around me</p> <p>I make eye contact</p> <p>I smile</p>	<p>I wiggle and squirm</p> <p>I frown and glare</p> <p>I act silly or wild</p> <p>My muscles get tight and my heart beats faster</p>	<p>I cry</p> <p>I yell or scream</p> <p>I stomp or bang on things</p> <p>I lose control</p>
What do I need to do?	<p>Get my energy up.</p>	<p>I'm good. I'm ready to learn and connect.</p>	<p>Get back to green zone</p>	<p>Use strategies to calm down!</p>
What could I do that would help me?	<p>Stretch</p> <p>Find a new toy to play with, something to do</p> <p>Get a drink of water</p> <p>Ask for a hug</p> <p>Tell someone how I feel</p> <p>Think happy thoughts</p>	<p>I can play or learn</p> <p>I could help a friend</p> <p>I could help a grown-up</p> <p>I can practice a calming strategy so I'm better at using it when I need it</p>	<p>Count to 20</p> <p>Take deep breaths</p> <p>Squeeze stress ball</p> <p>Jump, run or dance</p> <p>Write, draw, talk about it</p>	<p>Stop what I'm doing</p> <p>Walk away</p> <p>Be safe</p> <p>Ask for a break</p> <p>Get help</p>

Zones of Regulation – Create Your Own!

	BLUE ZONE	GREEN ZONE	YELLOW ZONE	RED ZONE
How I look or act				
What do I need to do?	Get my energy up.	I'm good. I'm ready to learn and connect.	Use strategies to settle down into the green zone.	Use strategies to calm down!! Or ask for help.
What helps me?				