

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

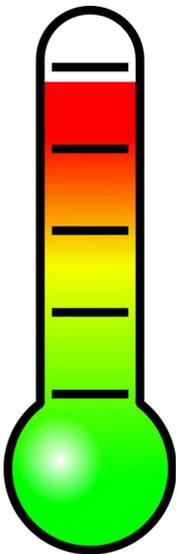
Miffed
Frustrated
Annoyed
Angry
Furious
Outraged

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 young 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. Focus on co-regulation: 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. For kids 5 and under, the parent uses this tool to think about calming tools to recommend to the child. For a child over 5, you can teach the idea of Zones, and help them learn to use it to self-identify feelings and coping options.

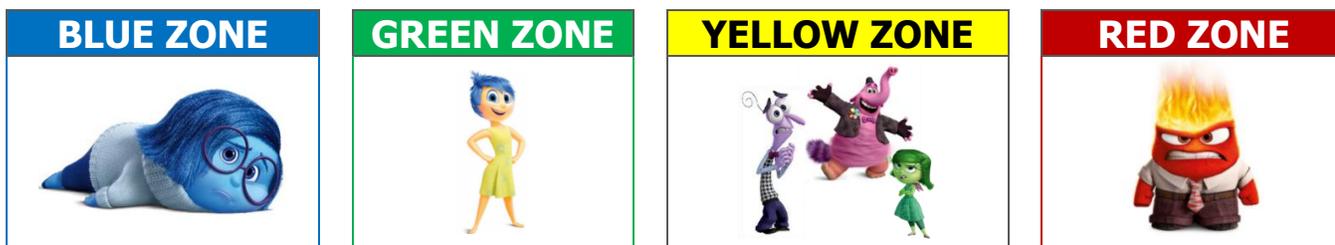
			
			
BLUE ZONE	GREEN ZONE	YELLOW ZONE	RED ZONE
Sad Sick Tired Bored Moving Slowly	Happy Calm Feeling Okay Focused Ready to Learn	Frustrated Worried Silly/Wiggly Excited Loss of Some Control	Mad/Angry Terrified Yelling/Hitting Elated Out of Control

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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 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. (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 = heartbroken; 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.)



The Zones of Regulation worksheet is a tool you can use to gather all these ideas into one place. If your child is under 5 years old, you’ll fill it out for them and use ideas from it to support them. For an older child, help them to fill it out and teach them how to use it to start learning how to notice and regulate their emotions.

If you’re filling it out, in the “how they look or act” section, think about what unique signs your child shows that tells you they’re in that stage. In the “what could I do” sections, write down things that you have found work for *your child* to help them get back to green.

Zones of Regulation – Sample if Parent Fills Out for a Child

	BLUE ZONE	GREEN ZONE	YELLOW ZONE	RED ZONE
How they look or act	<p>Moves slowly, lays on floor, declines to play</p> <p>Complains they're bored</p> <p>Big sighs</p> <p>Asks for snuggles, clingy</p>	<p>They smile</p> <p>They make eye contact</p> <p>Can play by themselves</p> <p>Want to be creative</p> <p>Sing, hum, chatter</p>	<p>Whiny voice, says 'I can't'</p> <p>Lots of body movement, jumps wildly, waves arms</p> <p>Voice starts to tremble</p> <p>Interrupts, repeats questions, agitated</p>	<p>They dump toys / food</p> <p>Throw things</p> <p>Yell or cry loudly</p> <p>Stomp, hit or lay on floor kicking</p>
What do they need to do?	<p>Get their energy up.</p> <p>Get more engaged.</p>	<p>They are ready to play, learn, and connect.</p>	<p>Use strategies to settle down into the green zone.</p>	<p>They need parent help to settle back down.</p>
What could I do, or coach them to do, that might help?	<p>I could validate feelings, talk about them</p> <p>Give them a hug</p> <p>Go for a walk</p> <p>Have a snack</p> <p>Snuggle and read</p> <p>Special time doing their preferred activity</p>	<p>Give lots of positive attention</p> <p>Encourage them to:</p> <p>Play</p> <p>Help others</p> <p>Practice coping skills to learn at other times</p>	<p>Take a break</p> <p>Tense & release muscles</p> <p>Outdoor activity</p> <p>Take a deep breath and then ask if he wants to take a deep breath w/ me</p> <p>Switch to a calming activity where they use their hands</p>	<p>Ensure safety (e.g. separate from sibling)</p> <p>Remove them from situation, move to new environment</p> <p>Be the calm</p> <p>Stop talking, sit side by side till they pass peak of anger, then soothe</p> <p>Wait till upstairs brain is online before talking much</p>

Zones of Regulation – Create Your Own!

	BLUE ZONE	GREEN ZONE	YELLOW ZONE	RED ZONE
How they look or act				
What do they need to do?	Get their energy up. Get more engaged	They are ready to play, learn and connect.	Use strategies to settle down into the green zone.	They need an adult to help them calm down.
What could I do, or coach them to do, that might help?				