

Core Strength: Self-Regulation

A luxury of modern life is the ability to make our homes comfortable by regulating the temperature. We are able to have warm rooms in the winter and cool spaces in the summer. All we do is set a thermostat for the temperature we choose. If the room gets too hot or too cold a furnace kicks on or off and adjusts the temperature accordingly, preventing the room from becoming unbearable. Wouldn't it be great if we could manage the moods of our children in the same way? If there was a "mood thermostat" on our children we could set that would kick in when they become too irritable or distraught or silly, and bring them back to an easy, calm center? Parenting would be so much easier -- no grocery store tantrums, middle school drama, or over-the-top foolishness.

Unfortunately, children don't come with built-in controls. A core task of childhood is learning to tolerate discomfort and manage responses to impulses. This skill, known as "self-regulation," is a core strength of human maturity. Infants are unable to self-regulate. An infant does not have the experience to understand that feelings of discomfort are temporary and will cease when the need is met. They immediately react when they experience distress, typically through crying. As the child develops and has thousands of experiences in which needs are consistently met and stress signals dissipate, they learn to tolerate distress for increasingly long periods. Putting a moment between an impulse and an action is a life skill and a strength that helps a child physiologically and emotionally. When this ability is absent, children do not have the self-discipline to achieve goals or to negotiate relationship challenges without resorting to hurtful, even violent, reactions.

Children learn to respond appropriately to distress with repetitive exposure to controllable challenges. It is not bad for children to experience low levels of distress in safe and responsive settings. It will help them develop the ability to manage frustration in other, less familiar settings. Moderate amounts of predictable distress in controlled environments leads to resilience.

Key to developing distress tolerance is learning to read the body's signals. A child must learn to correctly label uncomfortable sensations and develop appropriate ways to respond to those signals. Children must learn that when they are hungry or tired, they aren't really mad at someone, so they do not need to act mad. Caregivers need to help children recognize and name what they are experiencing and practice useful responses to those feelings.

The most important thing a caregiver can do to help a child develop this capacity is to model self-control. Children are very sensitive to the moods of adults and will absorb and magnify those reactions. Be self-aware enough to know when you cannot remain calm. Develop a self-care plan that allows you to remove yourself when you are at the end of your rope. When you feel overwhelmed, get help. Schools, churches, and agencies like Te Buckeye Ranch can offer support or guide you to places that fit the needs of your family. Know that with your consistent support your children will be able to handle life's frustrations with mature responses.