



Emotional Regulation and Zones

Emotions are made up of a wide range of different thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, so can be confusing for a child to understand. For children with additional needs, especially those with a developmental delay, sensory differences or communication difficulties, understanding and communicating what emotions they are feeling can become even more challenging. Therefore, they may need additional support in regulating these emotions.

The 'Overwhelmed' Bucket

A good way to think about how someone might become overwhelmed throughout the day is the water level in a bucket. Doing calming activities can help to feel a bit more regulated and empty the bucket, whilst being in environments that are extremely exciting, stressful or overwhelming add water to the bucket. If the bucket becomes full, this is where a meltdown might happen, because a person may be so overwhelmed that they cannot let anything else into the bucket. For those with additional needs, their bucket might fill up faster or smaller things might add to the bucket, leading to it becoming full more easily. The Zones of Regulation are a good way of describing how well-regulated or overwhelmed we might be feeling...



The Zones of Regulation

The Zones of Regulation curriculum uses colours to visually describe how alert or overwhelmed a person is feeling and can be easier to understand than names of emotions for some children with additional needs. There are 4 Zones: blue, green, yellow and red, where blue is the lowest alertness level and red is the highest alertness level. The Green Zone is what we would describe as 'regulated', where a person is calm, happy, and focused.

It is important to remember that although the aim is to stay in the Green Zone, it is fine to be in a different zone. The Zones of Regulation model just aims to help children recognise when they are not in the Green Zone, so that they can use strategies to regulate their emotions.

Lowest alertness

Highest alertness

<u>BLUE ZONE</u>	<u>GREEN ZONE</u>	<u>YELLOW ZONE</u>	<u>RED ZONE</u>
Tired	Happy	Frustrated	Angry/ Mad
Sad	Calm	Worried or anxious	Terrified
Tired	Focused	Excited	Shouting/ Hitting
Bored	Ready to learn	Silly	Elated
Moving Slowly		Some loss of control	Out of control
			'Meltdown'

→
Arousal Activities to go
'up' from blue to green

←
Calming Activities to go
'down' the zones to green

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Calming and arousal activity examples

Using a variety of different activities may help to regulate their emotions back to the Green Zone. Pointing out when it might be useful to do these activities could also help your child to learn habits to self-regulate. Here are some common examples of activities to try:

Exciting/ Arousal	Calming
• Jumping • Stretching • Going outside • Wall push ups • Walking • Sand/water/messy play	• Deep breaths • Watching TV or listening to music • Using sensory or fidget toys • Drawing or colouring • Counting • Deep pressure squeezes

What do I do when my child reaches the Red Zone?

The **Red Zone** is not always avoidable—it can be triggered by a combination of lots of small events throughout the day or one big trigger. The Red Zone is not just uncontrollable anger: it could also be extreme excitement, elation or sadness. The Red Zone is generally associated with feeling extreme emotions and being overwhelmed.

When your child is in the Red Zone, it can be difficult to try and reason with them. The best thing to do is add as little to their bucket as possible whilst they calm down.

- Try talking in a calm voice and avoid eye contact.
- Some children might respond well to cuddles and deep squeezes, whilst others will want to be left alone.
- Try not to reason with or ask questions to your young person whilst they are in the red. After they have calmed and are back in the Green Zone, you can work together to talk about what led to the Red Zone. Try asking questions about **WHAT** happened rather than **WHY** the event happened.
- The main priority is to keep yourself and your child as **safe** as possible. If you are at home, this can be achieved by providing them with a safe space such as a quiet corner away from objects.
- If you are out, this might look like keeping them away from busy roads or preventing them from running off.
- Some children might struggle with verbally saying what happened in the lead-up to being in the Red Zone, so drawing pictures like a comic strip might work better for them.



Emotional Regulation and Zones

Using the Zones at home and at school

Having conversations about the Zones can help your young person to identify their emotions and regulate them by themselves. There are many different ways that you can do this, both at home and by working with the school.

At Home:

Working on the Zones of Regulation does not have to be aimed just at your child. It is something that the whole family can take part in and discuss. Try spending time talking about each of the Zones and what they mean all together, and talking about how you are feeling throughout the day, as well as what you do to get back to the Green Zone (e.g. “Mummy is in the Blue Zone and feeling tired, so I am going to do a big stretch to feel more awake”). A parent or family member modelling the Zones like this can be useful to help with understanding of the Zones and how to move between them.

Some children respond well to looking at visuals when talking about emotions. These might help your child to understand what each of the Zones feels or looks like. You could also use visuals to problem solve and talk about what activities we could do in each Zone, so that it is easier to put in place when your young person is dysregulated. There are lots of free resources online that might be helpful with these discussions (see ‘useful resources’ for links).

At School:

Some schools might already know about the Zones of Regulation and run small group interventions or workshops with children. Ask your school if this is something that they are able to provide. If not, there is plenty that can be done in the classroom without separate group sessions.

- One way for the school to check in on the Zones is to use coloured cards on the desk in front of the children to say what Zone they are in, or a display somewhere in the classroom. This could help with your child recognising their emotions, or the teachers being able to help prompt when an individual needs to regulate, whilst also helping the whole class to recognise their emotions.
- Movement breaks, time out and sensory circuits might also be effective tools that the school can put in place to help with regulation. Fidget objects could help with regulation.



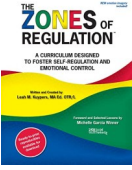
Some young people may be anxious about drawing attention to themselves, so might need more discreet ways of using the Zones and helping emotional regulation in schools.

- Many secondary schools use **time-out cards**, which might be useful for some young people who find the classroom overwhelming, allowing them time to stand outside or walk to find a trusted adult to help them.
- Similar to putting coloured cards on the table, leaving a pen or a highlighter the same colour of what Zone your young person is feeling might feel more discreet to your young person.



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Useful Resources



The Zones of Regulation - Leah Kuypers



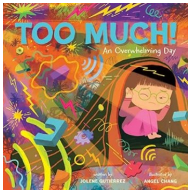
The Red Beast—K.I. Al-Ghani



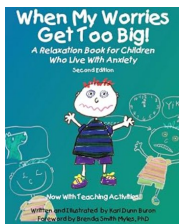
Campbell Little Big Feelings—Dr Janet Rose



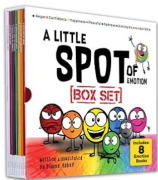
The boy with big, big feelings - Britney Winn Lee



Too much!: An Overwhelming Day - Jolene Gutierrez



When My Worries Get Too Big - Kari Dunn Buron



A Little Spot of Emotion—8 book box set - Diane Alber

Websites

<https://www.nhsborders.scot.nhs.uk/media/1001858/Zones-of-Regulation.pdf>

<https://zonesofregulation.com/resources/>

<https://www.bhamcommunity.nhs.uk/download.cfm?doc=docm93jjm4n670.pdf&ver=1016>

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