



The Key to ADHD Emotional Regulation Cultivating Gratitude, Pride & Compassion

We can't (and shouldn't) protect our children from every stressor that may overwhelm them, but we can use gratitude, pride, and compassion to help them build resilience. Here is a simple but effective 3-pronged approach to improving emotional regulation.

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The emotional component of ADHD is nearly as profound as it is underestimated.

Children with ADHD experience the same emotions as do other children, but their feelings are more frequent, intense, and longer-lasting. Because the underlying brain mechanisms that help manage emotions are affected by ADHD, emotional regulation development is delayed. Emotion hits them more quickly and it more easily overwhelms them. The result? Big, exaggerated overreactions. What's more, children with ADHD have a tough time self-soothing; they need more time to calm down and get over grudges.

Parents tell me that managing their kids' outbursts — and notoriously intense mood swings — is their most challenging struggle. Emotional dysregulation affects well-being, family life, academic achievement, and vocational success. It contributes to low self-esteem and social difficulties more than any other symptom of ADHD. Emotional dysregulation can also persist into adulthood and usually worsens with age, so early intervention is essential.

Emotional Brain vs. Cognitive Brain

Most interventions designed to teach emotional regulation are ineffective — even counterproductive — for children with ADHD because they rely on using the cognitive brain (e.g., executive functions) to control the emotional brain. But executive dysfunction is common in the ADHD brain, which often makes association errors when it's upset. As a result, a child's cognitive brain may promote problem behaviors and then justify the behavior afterward.

For example, a child may hit a classmate who cheated at soccer and then feel justified because the punch was meant to teach a lesson — even if his teacher had warned them not to hit before recess. The child's cognitive brain reacted to the cheating impulsively and ineffectively; it could not see clearly how to make a better decision at that moment.

Another problem is that using the cognitive brain is effortful and it tires very quickly. Working on an essay, for example, will deplete kids' brainpower, leaving few resources to make good decisions on the playground at recess. Children with ADHD might keep their cool at school but then meltdown when they get home. And, as any parent can attest, getting kids to think rationally, to identify if they are in the "red zone" or to use any calming strategy when they are in meltdown mode does not work.

For kids with ADHD, a more effective way to teach self-regulation skills is by harnessing the power of the emotional brain. Unlike the cognitive brain, the emotional brain is infinite. Emotions are stronger motivators than reason. The emotional brain acts quicker than the cognitive brain. When upset, the emotional brain will overpower the cognitive brain every time. And for children with ADHD, whose emotions are more automatic and intense than others, emotion takes over all thinking and influences what happens next in any situation. The bottom line: Kids with ADHD cannot use their cognitive brain when they are upset. Therefore, why not use their strong emotional brain to our advantage?

How to Harness the Emotional Brain for Regulation

When it comes to emotion regulation, the best strategies are proactive and positive. This is especially important for kids with ADHD because they invest so much effort into doing well and controlling themselves. Unfortunately, they still overreact and still get so much more corrective feedback than do other kids, which is very disheartening.

Since down-regulating negative emotions are so cognitively effortful, up-regulating positive emotions is a better approach because it is easier to do and increases the likelihood of success. Many of the positive parenting strategies you're already using — novelty, rewards, and making tasks engaging — are effective in promoting positive emotions, too. Why? Because we seek tasks that promote helpful, feel-good emotions and contribute to motivation and persistence. In any situation, proactively regulating positive emotions helps reduce problem behaviors (with the bonus of building self-esteem and cooperation).

For example, my daughter used to fight with me every morning about going to school because lunch was stressful. To help her get over this hurdle, we tapped into her emotional brain by giving her things to look forward to — rather than worry about — at school.

At night we focused on strengthening the cognitive brain. Before she went to sleep, we worked on coping with anxiety. We talked about what to do when worry shows up (that helps make it predictable), and reviewed how to problem solve different scenarios like what she could do if she had no one to eat with at lunch or if her friends didn't want to play a game she wanted to play at recess.

Three Prosocial Emotions That Bolster Emotional Regulation

Targeting future-oriented prosocial emotions are particularly important for children with ADHD because they live moment-to-moment, unable to think ahead about the consequences of their emotions or behaviors. **Gratitude, pride, and compassion** are three key future-oriented prosocial emotions that help build persistence, cooperation, and empathy in children with ADHD.

Here are some practical strategies for building them:

Six Ways to Cultivate Gratitude

Gratitude can rescue us from emotional (over)reactions and build delay gratification. When we are thankful for what we have, we stop seeking out the next best thing. Here are some ideas that build gratitude.

#1. Give thanks every day. Establish a family ritual, like discussing the five things you are grateful for every day or talking about what inspired you today.

#2. Make a gratitude jar. Because children with ADHD are visual, writing down notes of gratitude each day may help them “see” this emotion.

#3. Encourage them to write thank-you notes. Part of being grateful is remembering all the important people in our life. Encourage your child to send notes of appreciation to people who’ve helped them during the week.

#4. Create a tribal tree of support. Have kids decorate a tree on a piece of paper or poster board and then write the names of everyone in their life who supports the — family members, friends, teachers, coaches, youth ministers, etc. Hang the tree somewhere prominent to remind them of all the supportive people in their lives.

#5. Make a Reciprocity Ring. When someone needs help with something — homework or another type of task — they post the “job” on a Post-It note or whiteboard. Think of it as a family “help wanted” ad. The helper then writes their name on the paper. This is a visual way for family members to see how they are supported by each other. Helping others makes us feel good. Having these acts of generosity on display promotes family harmony by fostering cooperation and collaboration.

#6. Write I Noticed Notes. Catching and recognizing acts of goodness is especially important for kids with ADHD, who receive so much criticism throughout their day. I Noticed notes are a great way to highlight prosocial behavior and provide a constant stream of positive feedback, which helps kids with ADHD stay on track. They also build gratitude because someone is taking time out of their day to compose a hand-written note.

Three Ways to Build Pride

Pride is another goal-directed emotion that directly promotes self-control, effort, and perseverance — even more than motivation, self-efficacy, self-esteem, or even just being happy. When we are proud, we are motivated to work harder. The keys to building pride are connection and contribution. Children need to feel like they are doing something valuable for people who are important to them.

#1. Allow your child to be an expert in something that interests them. Dog walker. Video game master. Bathroom sink cleaner. It doesn't matter. What's important is to find something the child is good at and create opportunities for them to share their knowledge or skill. Let them help make important decisions within their field of expertise, too.

#2. Give your child an important job to do. Yes, even if you can do it yourself in half the time with a fraction of the mess. Be on the lookout for basic life skills such as cooking scrambled eggs or ironing a cotton shirt. Kids benefit when they contribute in a meaningful way to the family — and you, do, too. Even if they are working independently, children will work longer on hard tasks when they think they are contributing to the group.

Maybe there's a chore (pumping up the bike tires, perhaps?) they can complete that will contribute to the whole family going for a bike ride together. Motivate them to work through a hard task by playing upbeat music or offering encouragement as they move through it.

#3. Make a skills board. List things they're good at or things that others value such as comforting small children or being very thoughtful when others are hurt.

Five Ways to Help Your Child Act with Compassion

Compassion is a critical prosocial emotion that helps overcome anxiety, avoidance, and procrastination while promoting empathy and cooperation.

#1. Treat your family like a team. The best way to promote compassion is through similarity. Any cue can work, even wearing the same color. That's why athletes wear the same team jersey. It unites them as a team. Maybe you can clean up an outdoor community space together as a family. On the designated Saturday, don T-shirts specifically designed for the occasion. Working together towards a goal, sharing areas of interest, acknowledging each other's achievements, and supporting others are all ways to promote compassion.

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#2. Play a conversation-starting game like *Never Have I Ever*. Each player takes a turn asking other players about things they haven't done. For example, "I've never broken my arm." If a player in the game has had a broken arm, they keep score on a piece of paper. Play continues until everyone has had a chance to contribute. These sorts of experiences help kids see the many ways they connect to others.

#3. Practice mindfulness meditation. Buddhist Monks originated meditation ages ago as a way to develop compassion, and this centuries-old tradition works just as well today. There are plenty of guided meditation apps, but it's easy to carve out opportunities to practice being in the present moment — noticing smells, sounds, and textures during a neighborhood walk.

#4. Teach children to practice self-compassion. Self-compassion is particularly important for children with ADHD because of the amount of corrective feedback they get and the amount of guilt and shame they often experience. Self-compassion allows them to accept mistakes, as well as the fact that having ADHD might mean they have to work harder than others with certain things. Talking about neurodiversity and everyone's strengths and challenges is a great way to build self-compassion in the early stages. Just like I need glasses to see as far as others, they may need an extra cool down period after recess before they can settle into learning. Be sure to point to the upside of having ADHD — being energetic or extremely creative, for example — when having strengths and weaknesses conversations.

#5. Teach them about their brain. Teaching children about their brain — how it is still developing and how they can help build it through diet, sleep, and coping skills — is also helpful. Then, for example, when kids get distracted, they understand that their brain got too excited by the sound in the hallway and can figure out what they need to do to get their brain back on track (vs. internalizing I am stupid).

Experiment with different ways to incorporate gratitude, pride, and compassion into your child's life. Remember, kids constantly change. So, too, will your family's strategies for building emotional control through positivity. Be patient, and know that nothing is a substitute for focused practice and constructive feedback.