

Self-Calming Strategies for Learners

This article was initially written for interventionists working with children with ASD. We believe that parents could learn from it as they would be able to apply concepts and strategies presented in their family and daily life.

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Rosie, an eleven-year-old student, had started exhibiting aggressive behaviour toward objects (pushing materials away, tearing or crumpling papers, and tossing materials on the floor) when she became frustrated with an activity. The team and parents had started prompting her by saying, “Rosie, take deep breaths. You need to calm down.” The school team and parents noticed that every time they said it was time to calm down, her frustration increased and the aggression toward the object became more intense. The words “calm down” and “breathe” appeared to trigger Rosie; she would tear more paper or start to kick things close by while insisting she did not need to breathe or calm down.

This well-meaning school team and parents really wanted to help Rosie decrease her aggressive behaviours and self-regulate her emotions. Teaching calming strategies can be a key part of teaching self-regulation; however, it is important to consider several factors and have a plan for teaching the learner these skills. The first thing to consider is **When in the history of being told to calm down, has anyone ever calmed down? Really?** Think about a recent time when you were feeling frustrated; perhaps you were part of a heated discussion or stuck in traffic and late for an appointment. Would it have been helpful if a significant other or colleague told you that it was time to calm down or that you needed to take some deep breaths? Maybe, but likely not...

Effective Self-Calming Strategies

The following are some strategies to consider when teaching students self-calming strategies, as well as how they were implemented by Rosie’s team:

- **Complete a Functional Behaviour Assessment (FBA) to help understand the function of the learner’s behaviour (if needed).** Understanding why the learner may be getting upset or exhibiting a behaviour is essential to a successful intervention. In Rosie’s situation, after an FBA was completed, data indicated that she was likely frustrated with the volume of work being assigned and was attempting to escape. The team decided that in addition to teaching calming strategies, they would also implement strategies to help Rosie prioritize her assignments, chunk her work into smaller sections, and manage her time.
- **Identify potential reinforcers for the learner when teaching this new skill.** Select reinforcers that are appropriate for the learner to help motivate the learner to exhibit new skills. If possible, reinforcers should be natural and related to the activity. The team identified some potential reinforcers for Rosie such as time to draw, choosing classroom music during indoor recess, and extra time with a reading buddy.
- **Teach the learner to identify emotions.** Learners who exhibit aggression can sometimes be described as going from 0–100 in a very short time. However, it is more likely that the learner’s emotions changed more gradually from calm, to slightly agitated, and then to becoming frustrated, but these signs were not noticed. Teaching Rosie to identify the escalation was essential for her to learn

how to catch herself on the way up. Use a graphic representation of emotions such as a 5-point scale or an emotions thermometer to make the escalation of emotions concrete. Rosie and her classmates were taught about identifying emotions using an emotions thermometer. The entire class was asked to “check in” and take notice of how they were feeling using the graphic at different times of the day. Rosie received additional teaching and coaching during her scheduled times and during this class check in.

- **Choose a few (3–5) simple age and developmentally appropriate calming activities and strategies for the learner.** Using a theme that interests the learner can sometimes add to the motivation of learners using the strategy. Choose strategies that peers and family are also using when possible and appropriate. Examples include deep breathing, calming sequences, listening to music, stretches, and taking a short walk to get a drink of water. Teaching multiple strategies allows the learner to have some flexibility and choices for different situations.
- **Plan and schedule daily teaching and practise times.** When possible, incorporate multiple short teaching times throughout the day. Teach these skills as part of the daily schedule when the learner is calm, rather than waiting until the learner is upset. Rosie’s team scheduled four 5-minute lessons and practise times per day (arrival at school in morning, after morning break, before math class in the morning, and after the lunch hour).
- **Foster independence using the strategy.** Teach and practise the new skills until the learner can complete the activity independently before requiring them to use it in an everyday setting. Independently means the learner can start and complete the entire activity without any assistance or prompting from those around them.
- **Coach the learner to use strategies in the moment (*before* behaviour escalates).** When the learner can independently do 2 or more of the calming strategies, a team can decide to do some prompting and coaching in the moment. Rosie’s team had identified certain behaviours Rosie exhibited *before* she would start showing aggression toward objects. This is when the school team member would intervene and prompt Rosie to “check in” on her thermometer and choose a short break to complete one of her mastered calming strategies. The teacher would vary the intervention: 1) Ask the whole class to check their thermometer and choose an activity that would help them learn best, or 2) go directly to ask Rosie to check in with her by pointing at the thermometer and asking her to choose one of activities available to her.
- **Generalize and practise the use of calming strategies to different environments and with different people.** Practise the skill in different areas of the school, home, and community and around various people. People in Rosie’s life (different teachers in her school, parents, grandparents, and her after school daycare team) were informed and were provided with the modelling about how to support Rosie in using her new strategies.

Everyone can benefit from learning a few calming strategies and activities. Some learners like Rosie will need more direct teaching and practise. Some learners will master these skills quickly, while others will need continued support over time. Taking a few minutes each day to focus on these strategies can help a learner like Rosie make better choices when she feels frustrated in the future. It is an essential skill for success at school, at home, and in the community.