

Frustration: Helping Handout for School and Home

MOLLY ALGERMISSEN, CLAIRE GOLDEN, & MEGHANTOMB

INTRODUCTION

Students who are easily frustrated tend to get very upset when even small things do not go their way, and they tend to give up quickly when they are faced with a challenge. In addition, when they are upset, their reactions can be intense and their frustration can result in meltdowns, tears, and difficulty completing tasks. To make matters worse, they also often have trouble waiting for a teacher's or parent's attention or help. Poor frustration tolerance can show itself in different ways. Some students have instant responses, and they immediately melt down when faced with challenging situations, limits, or negative feedback. Others have a slow and steady decline, and they melt down once they reach their tipping point (Bronson, 2000).

Poor frustration tolerance can make it challenging for students to learn (Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007). This can happen for many reasons. Typically, students need to be calm and well regulated in order to understand what the teacher is teaching. In addition, if students are frustrated because the work is too hard, they may avoid putting in the additional work necessary to master new information or a new skill. A frustrated student who is having an outburst can take the teacher's attention away from the rest of the class, affecting everyone's learning.

The heart of poor frustration tolerance is often poor self-regulation skills. Self-regulation is the ability to regulate emotions and behaviors in the day-to-day environment (Kopp, 1982). It includes the ability to respond calmly to upsetting events, calm oneself down when upset, respond to changing expectations or situations or changes in routines, and work toward more long-term goals. Self-regulation, including frustration tolerance, can be very difficult for students who have preexisting difficulties with emotional and

behavioral regulation, such as students with attention, behavioral, or emotional difficulties.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING PROGRAMS

Before selecting an intervention program, teachers and parents should consider a program's feasibility and effectiveness, as demonstrated in a number of key areas. Few programs focus solely on frustration tolerance, and most focus more broadly on promoting self-regulation and coping skills. Teachers and parents should look for programs and interventions that have empirical support showing their effectiveness. It is also important to know whether the program or intervention was designed and evaluated for specific locations (e.g., clinic vs. school) or for specific ages (e.g., elementary vs. high school). Programs often differ in how they describe and deliver content, depending on the developmental level of the students. Whereas some are intended for use at the universal level (e.g., a school-wide curriculum on emotion identification and regulation), others are designed to target specific groups, such as students with autism or ADHD. When selecting a school-based intervention program, also seek one that provides ongoing support and guidance, when available.

Much of the evidence-based work on frustration tolerance is built on cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques to develop self-regulation and coping skills. Common interventions include individual and family therapy, and many books provide activities parents can use to help their child develop these skills at home.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HOME

Frustration is a normal and even functional human emotion. Therefore, the goal of intervention is not to

erase all feelings of frustration but to help students recognize signs of frustration and learn to better control their emotional and behavioral responses to frustrating events. This process requires time and practice. The strategies below can be implemented in the home, but teachers can flexibly use similar strategies in the classroom.

1. **Teach your child to recognize physical cues that frustration is building.** Draw an outline of a person and have your child color or draw to show where he or she feels frustration or anger (e.g., clenched hands, racing heart, rapid breathing).
2. **Let your child know you understand the frustration.** Frustration can be an intense emotion for many children. When your child is frustrated, empathize and show that you appreciate how difficult feeling upset can be. Help your child identify and label strong emotions (“How are you feeling right now?”). If your child needs more scaffolding and support, you can comment on the emotions you see (e.g., “You look frustrated. Is that right?”). Teach the vocabulary of feelings, including words that express different intensities of the same emotion (e.g., annoyed, angry, furious).
3. **Teach breathing exercises.** Deep breathing can help soothe children and help them better regulate their behavioral response to intense feelings, which in turn helps them work through stressful and frustrating events. Be sure to teach these skills when both you and your child are calm. Have your child sit comfortably and relax. One way to teach relaxation is to demonstrate counting to four while inhaling through the nose, holding that breath while counting to four again, then exhaling through the mouth while counting to four. Repeat several times and practice regularly.
4. **Teach positive venting.** This strategy can help release tension before it boils over. It is important to provide empathy while you do this, as children need to feel understood and heard (e.g., “That makes me so mad too!”). To give an outlet to strong feelings, help create a list of things that make your child mad and upset, or have your child draw the feelings (e.g., “Draw how you felt when that happened.”). Then have your child physically defeat the feelings—scribble out the list or drawings, tear them up, or karate chop them.
5. **Help your child identify triggers.** Knowing what the triggers for frustration are can help children use their strategies (or help you encourage them

to use their strategies) before they are too upset to effectively implement them. Keep track of triggers by helping your child identify what happened prior to becoming frustrated, as well as what was happening when the meltdown occurred. No two children will have the exact same triggers, but the following are some common ones to keep your eye out for (Hurley, 2016):

- Transitions between activities or locations, especially when transitioning to a less preferred activity
 - Negative peer interactions, or fighting with friends
 - Challenging academic or homework activities
 - Feelings of being misunderstood by adults, or belief that adults are unfair
 - Hunger, exhaustion, or illness
6. **Help your child think through possible solutions for dealing with a frustrating problem, but don't do all the work.** Say what you are observing and ask your child to figure out a strategy to use. For example, you can say: “I understand that you are upset about this math problem. What are three things you think you could do?” If this is too difficult, it can help to present three options, such as: “Can you ask for help? Do you need a break? Should you try again?” It may also help to break the challenge into smaller, more manageable parts.
You might also try the stoplight technique. To use this technique, teach your child to visualize a red stoplight as soon as he or she first feels frustration. This will be the cue to tap into deep breathing to focus on calming the physical and emotional response. Then your child can shift to a yellow light, moving cautiously forward while thinking of the identified solutions that help control the feelings. Finally, your child can visualize the green light, which means he or she can pick an option and move forward. It may help to create a large stoplight out of construction paper as you teach the skills.
 7. **Use humor.** Laughter is a great way for children to deal with strong emotions, which can reduce tension and in turn help emotion regulation. Play an active or silly game with your child so that you are both laughing rather than focusing on the frustration. When you are lighthearted in play, it allows children to regain a sense of power and connect with you, which helps relieve frustration.
 8. **Challenge children's “extreme thinking.”** Some children can have unrealistic or unhelpful thoughts

that fuel their low frustration tolerance (e.g., “I *never* get things right,” or “I am the *worst* reader in the world.”). Children often need help identifying frustration-provoking thoughts and ideas and replacing them with more realistic and coping-focused ones (e.g., “Everyone makes mistakes”; “I have to practice this reading more before I get it right.”). When your child uses extreme words (e.g., *always*, *never*), say that you understand the feelings, then use less extreme language in your response. For example, if your child says “I will never remember all of these multiplication tables!” you could say, “Yes, it is hard to remember these tables, and you are really working hard at it. Remember, you already know a lot of them and you are making progress.”

9. ***Give your child a chance to manage feelings.*** When your child encounters a challenging situation, don't immediately offer help. Rather, step back and observe and allow your child to work through difficult tasks first. For example, if your child is struggling with a zipper, give him or her some time to work at the problem before offering to zip the jacket.
10. ***Help your child learn to wait.*** Don't immediately respond to all requests (for a drink, for attention, etc.). While your child is waiting, talk about what you are doing: “I will help you in a minute, as soon as I am finished tying your brother's shoe.” It also helps to praise patient waiting (“Thanks for waiting so patiently.”).
11. ***Play board games to practice self-regulation skills.*** Playing games with others teaches skills such as waiting your turn and winning or losing appropriately. Model positive responses (e.g., “I really hoped I was going to win, but maybe I will win next time.”).
12. ***Encourage your child to express emotion.*** Listening to a child who is upset (and crying) is not easy or fun, but negative feelings are just as valid and important as positive ones, and children need a safe place to express all emotions. Bottling up negative emotions can lead to more explosive meltdowns later.
13. ***Praise effort rather than the finished product.*** Comment on the ways your child persevered through challenging tasks (e.g., “I'm impressed by how hard you worked on that project. I know it wasn't easy for you.”).
14. ***Model dealing with frustration.*** How do you act when you are frustrated yourself? Children are

always watching and listening, and they learn a lot from watching their parents. When you are frustrated in the presence of your child, try demonstrating some of the skills outlined above (e.g., use deep breathing, model the use of coping thoughts).

15. ***Set limits and stick to them.*** Children need to hear “No” every so often—to a request for a toy or treat, to extra time playing video games, or to a demand for a later bedtime. Children need limits, and even if they become upset, they need you to stick to those expressed limits.
16. ***Notice and reinforce times when your child is using coping skills.*** “Catch” your child in situations in which he or she is using good frustration tolerance or emotion regulation. This positively reinforces strategies across settings and situations. For example, you might say, “Wow! I know you wanted me to help you right away with your homework. I appreciate that you could wait until I finished the dishes.”

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL

Many of the recommendations listed above for parents are very useful for teachers. It also is very helpful to work with parents of students who become frustrated. It will enhance students' learning when strategies for helping them respond calmly to upsetting events, and reminders to use the strategies, are consistent across settings.

17. ***Use private reminders when needed.*** Use proximity or a private signal to remind the student to pay attention or return to a task. Check in with the student individually when you know the subject is difficult for that student. Do not call attention to the student's difficulties in front of the class.
18. ***Encourage working in pairs to help solidify new knowledge in a low-stakes environment.*** For example, when learning a new math concept, pair students up to play a fun math game that uses the new concept. This way the student can practice the skill for mastery in a less stressful setting.
19. ***Explicitly identify mistakes as a necessary part of learning, and encourage risk-taking.*** Help the student reframe his or her mistakes as an opportunity to learn instead of a reason to give up. Mistakes can help the student improve understanding or use new strategies. Encourage and reinforce risk-taking, and teach the child to

view mistakes and risk-taking as parts of the journey to mastery.

20. **Provide scaffolding for more complex assignments.** Offer more structured guidance and support. Also give the student frequent reminders to use strategies and skills you have already introduced and to ask for help when needed.
21. **Model effective self-regulation strategies.** These would include strategies for recognizing and managing frustration, such as the following:
 - Acknowledging the student's feelings and the situation: "I see that you are frustrated with that math problem."
 - Labeling the emotion and empathizing: "That looks hard. How are you feeling?" If needed, provide guidance: "You look angry," or "I also feel angry when I am frustrated."
 - Demonstrating steps you use to cope with frustration, such as saying aloud, "I think I need to take three deep breaths now," followed by taking some deep breaths.
 - Offering suggestions on how to solve problems that are leading to frustration: "Do you need help?" "Do you want to work on this later?"
22. **Provide a safe space, or give a break, when the student is feeling frustrated.** Create a "cool-down spot" in the classroom where students can go when they recognize they need to calm down. Or give the student a break, allowing the student to leave the room (get water, take a walk down the hall) when needed.
23. **Try to catch frustration before it boils over.** Check in with the student, reminding the student to use coping strategies, take a break, or ask for help.
24. **Consider whether adjustments to academic demands or other supports are needed.** Learning difficulties can fuel frustration. If you notice that the student often becomes easily frustrated when working on a certain subject (e.g., reading), then further assessment of academic skills, and curriculum adjustments, may be warranted. Likewise, if frustration continues in spite of recommended interventions, consider referring the student for a social-emotional evaluation and support services, such as from a school psychologist or counselor.
25. **Consider implementation of a school-wide emotional intelligence and self-regulation curriculum.** Several evidence-based curricula are available, including the following:

- RULER (Brackett, Rivers, Reyes, & Salovy, 2012) provides a school-wide curriculum that builds on itself every year. It begins with fundamental emotional intelligence education, builds emotional vocabulary, and provides concrete ways to build emotional intelligence into all aspects of school life. Teachers and students become "trainers" who can help others identify their emotions and learn to talk about them in productive ways.
- Zones of Regulation (Kuypers, 2011) uses a cognitive-behavioral approach to help students identify when they are in one of four emotional or behavioral states, or "zones," which are represented by different colors. Students learn how to (a) read emotions in themselves and others, including reading facial expressions; (b) become more aware of how their behavior affects others; and (c) identify triggers. Students learn calming techniques, cognitive strategies, and sensory supports that help them move from one zone to another.
- STEPS-A (Mazza, Dexter-Mazza, Miller, Rathus, & Murphy, 2016) is designed for middle and high school students within the general education curriculum. It is adapted from dialectical behavior therapy and includes building specific skills for mindfulness, distress tolerance, emotion regulation, and interpersonal communication.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

For School

Websites

<http://ei.yale.edu/ruler/ruler-overview/>

RULER is an evidence-based curriculum to improve social and emotional learning within the school setting. The website describes the curriculum and provides online support for teachers and schools using the program.

<http://www.zonesofregulation.com/>

Zones of Regulation is an evidence-based curriculum to improve emotional regulation. It is developed to be used as a school-wide program. The website provides online resources for participating schools, including webinars, trainings, and individual support.

Books

Cannon, L., Kenworthy, L., Alexander, K., Werner, M. A., & Anthony, L. (2011). *Unstuck and on target: An executive function curriculum to improve flexibility for children with autism spectrum disorders*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes.

This book describes classroom-based interventions, including ready-made lessons, for higher-functioning students with autism spectrum disorders ages 8–11. It is intended to help promote behavioral and cognitive flexibility, including improving coping skills and better managing feelings of frustration.

Cash, R. M. (2016). *Self-regulation in the classroom: Helping students learn how to learn*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

This book describes the self-regulation learning method (affect, behavior, and cognition), as well as the stages of self-regulated learning. It provides resources, strategies, and suggestions for teachers on how to help students better manage challenging emotions such as frustration, and become more engaged and motivated learners.

Kuypers, L. M., & Winner, M. G. (2011). *The Zones of Regulation: A curriculum designed to foster self-regulation and emotional control*. Santa Clara, CA: Think Social.

This book describes a curriculum that is based on cognitive-behavioral therapy and helps students develop emotional awareness. It teaches students techniques to help them more effectively manage their emotions and behavior, including calming techniques, cognitive strategies, and sensory supports.

For Home

Websites

<https://www.addrc.org/innovative-approach-helping-explosive-inflexible-children/>

The ADD Resource Center is a valuable resource for families and teachers who work with children who have difficulties with emotional and behavioral dysregulation. The website includes information about ADHD and emotional dysregulation, strategies to use at home and at school, and resources for interventions.

<http://understood.org>

The website Understood.org gives parents well-researched and practical advice on a range of topics related to children with learning and attention issues. The website includes sections on feelings, such as how to manage anger and frustration and how to develop coping skills.

Books

Greene, R. W. (2005). *The explosive child*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.

This book helps parents better understand intense children with challenging behaviors and provides clear, groundbreaking parenting strategies to help prevent explosive outbursts and promote adaptive coping skills.

Shanker, S. (2017). *Self-Reg: How to help your child (and you) break the stress cycle and successfully engage with life*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

This book, based on decades of research, helps parents gain a deeper understand of self-regulation.

Shapiro, L. E., Sprague, R., & McKay, M. (2009). *The relaxation and stress reduction workbook for kids: Help for children to cope with stress, anxiety, and transitions*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.

This book provides activities that parents can do with children to help them better manage stress and feelings of frustration and worry. This book is geared more toward younger children (ages 4–8).

For Parents and Teachers

Books

Kenney, L., & Comizio, R. (2016). *70 play activities for better thinking, self-regulation, learning and behavior*. Eau Claire, WI: PESI.

This book describes creative, fun, and brain-based exercises for children and adolescents to develop attention, planning, executive function, and mood management skills.

Lite, L., & Stasuyk, M. (2011). *Angry octopus*. Marietta, GA: Stress Free Kids.

This book tells a story that teaches children how to use progressive muscle relaxation and breathing techniques to lower stress, manage frustrations, and control anger.

Games

Playing CBT

This board game is designed to help children and adolescents identify and discuss emotional experiences (thoughts, emotions, physical sensations and behaviors). It will help improve daily coping skills and encouraging flexibility in cognitive, emotional, physical, and behavioral responses.

<https://playingcbt.com/product/playing-cbt>

Related Helping Handouts

Happiness and Self-Esteem: Helping Handout for School and Home

Perfectionism: Helping Handout for School and Home
Preventing and Correcting Misbehavior and Developing Self-Discipline: Helping Handout for Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for Home

Social and Emotional Learning: Helping Handout for School

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

REFERENCES

- Brackett, M. A., Rivers, S. E., Reyes, M. R., & Salovey, P. (2012). Enhancing academic performance and social and emotional competence with the RULER feeling words curriculum. *Learning and Individual Differences, 22*(2), 218–224.
- Bronson, M. B. (2000). *Self-regulation in early childhood. Nature and nurture*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Graziano, P. A., Reavis, R. D., Keane, S. P., & Calkins, S. D. (2007). The role of emotion regulation in children's early academic success. *Journal of School Psychology, 45*(1), 3–19.

Hurley, K. (2016, February 1). How to teach frustration tolerance to kids. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/parents/expert-tips-advice/2016/02/teach-frustration-tolerance-kids/>

Kopp, C. B. (1982). Antecedents of self-regulation: A developmental perspective. *Developmental Psychology, 18*(2), 199–214.

Kuypers, L. (2011). *The zones of regulation*. San Jose, CA: Think Social Publishing.

Mazza, J. J., Dexter-Mazza, E. T., Miller, A. L., Rathus, J. H., & Murphy, H. E. (2016). *DBT® skills in schools: Skills training for emotional problem solving for adolescents DBT STEPS-A*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Molly Algermissen, PhD, is a child psychologist and neuropsychologist, and assistant professor of medical psychology (in psychiatry) at Columbia University Medical Center. She specializes in assessment of neurodevelopmental disorders, including autism spectrum and learning disorders.

Claire Golden, PhD, is a neuropsychologist and school psychologist and instructor of medical psychology (in psychiatry) at Columbia University Medical Center. She specializes in assessment of neurodevelopmental disorders, with particular expertise in school-related difficulties.

Meghan Tomb, PhD, is a clinical neuropsychologist and assistant professor of medical psychology (in psychiatry) at Columbia University Medical Center. She specializes in assessment of neurodevelopmental disorders and is well versed in cognitive-behavioral treatments for children and adolescents.

© 2018 National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814—(301) 657-0270