

Why this resource?

This module is designed to help carers understand why children may react strongly, how to respond in ways that support regulation and connection, and how to repair relationships when ruptures occur. By providing a clear framework, practical strategies, and reflective practices, it empowers carers to feel confident and grounded, even in difficult moments. It emphasises that the goal is not to “fix” the child, but to hold space for their feelings, build trust, and model healthy emotional regulation.

Understanding Big Feelings

Children who have experienced loss, separation, or instability often carry their feelings in their bodies rather than in words. **Emotional dysregulation is not a child being “difficult”; it is a child showing us that their nervous system is overwhelmed.** For many children, their body reacts first and their thinking comes later. When a child is dysregulated, they are operating from survival rather than logic. This can look like:

- Sudden big emotions that seem to come “out of nowhere”
- Intense reactions to small limits or changes
- Shutting down, going quiet, or appearing distant
- Aggression, yelling, throwing objects, or running away
- Difficulty calming once upset, even with reassurance
- Crying that escalates rather than settles
- Freezing, zoning out, or becoming very quiet
- Seeming unreasonable or unable to listen

A helpful image can be an overflowing cup. Imagine the child's cup is already very full from past stress or little moments of stress throughout their day. A small extra drop (a request, a transition, a reminder of loss) can cause it to spill over. The behaviour is the spill, not the problem itself. Remember that all behaviour is communication and when their brains have switched off, it's about regulating with them. It's no longer a teaching moment. The goal isn't to fix, it's to be with them.

What makes this different?

All children experience big feelings. Tantrums, limit-testing, and frustration are part of normal development. For children who have experienced trauma, the key difference is often the intensity, frequency, and recovery time. Typical developmental behaviour:

- Matches age and stage
- Improves with practice and maturity
- Settles fairly quickly with support

Trauma-related responses:

- Feel disproportionate to the situation
- Appear repetitive or “stuck”
- Take much longer to settle
- Are triggered by things that may seem unclear to adults

A useful way to understand this is the smoke alarm analogy. A typical stress response is like an alarm that sounds when there is real smoke. A trauma-impacted system is hypersensitive—it goes off when toast burns. The child is not choosing this; their nervous system is trying to keep them safe.



Holding Space for Emotions

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Planning for Big Emotions

In moments of distress, carers can feel unsure what to say or do. Preparing ahead reduces stress for both the carer and the child.

Grounding scripts may include:

- "I can see you're having a hard time."
- "You're not in trouble. I'm here."
- "Your body is feeling overwhelmed."
- "We'll slow this down together."

For some children, even this may be too much; a simple "I'm here" can be enough.

While scripts help, **non-verbal communication carries most of the message in moments of crisis:**

- Facial expression
- Tone, pitch, and pace of voice
- Body posture and movement
- Proximity, presence, and eye contact
- Calm nervous system cues

Consistency matters more than perfection

When we're triggered

When children's emotions escalate, it can also activate stress in us—especially when we are tired or carrying a lot. Feeling triggered does not mean you are failing; it means your nervous system is responding to overwhelm.

Children calm through connection before

correction. Many live in a state of high alert and settle by being close to an adult who is steady. Calm is something they borrow from you.

Co-regulation starts with your own body. When you slow and steady yourself, the child can begin to settle too.

You can model calm by pausing before responding, taking slow visible breaths, softening your face and tone, coming to the child's level, and using fewer, slower words.

Helpful language includes: "I'm here," "You're safe with me," "I can handle this," and "Let's slow this down together."

You don't need to fix the moment. Your calm, consistent presence is the anchor.

Repair

Ruptures are inevitable but **repair is where trust is built.** Before repairing with a child, self-compassion matters.

Repair helps children learn that adults can make mistakes and recover, conflict does not end relationships, and safety can be restored.

Repair does not need to be long or perfect—just genuine and done once everyone is calm. It might sound like:

- "I raised my voice earlier."
- "That may have felt scary."
- "I care about you, and I'm still here."

Think of repair as steadying a bridge after a storm.

You are not rebuilding the relationship, just restoring enough safety to cross again. Over time, repeated repair teaches children that relationships endure and carers that they do not need to be perfect to be safe.

We don't need a fix it response

As adults, we are natural problem-solvers, which can make it tempting to move quickly into fixing or reassuring. But for a child, the problem feels big and is happening right now in their body. When we rush to fix or minimise, often with care, we can miss what the child needs most: to feel understood. Responses like "It's not a big deal" or "You'll be fine" can unintentionally move past connection.

Holding space means slowing down and meeting the child where they are, even when you know the solution.

Connection-first responses sound like: "That feels really big," "I can see why you're upset," or "Let's sit with this for a moment." When children feel seen, their nervous system can settle—and then problem-solving becomes possible.

Further Reading & Resources

Harvard Center on the Developing Child –
Core Concepts of Regulation & Repair
(developingchild.harvard.edu)

The Power of Showing Up – Daniel Siegel & Tina
Payne Bryson