How to Calm and Support your Child
Advice for Parents and Guardians

The Government closed all schools in Ireland in order to slow down the spread of the Covid-19 virus and to keep as many people as possible safe and well. This decision affected the lives of all children and young people. While many have coped well, many have found it difficult at times and going back to school may be challenging Some may be feeling worried about someone close to them getting sick or some may be worried about getting sick themselves. Some may be feeling bored, demotivated, sad and lonely.

These strong feelings can cause children/young people to behave in ways that can be difficult to understand and manage. If they become overwhelmed by feelings, they can find it hard to control these feelings or how their body reacts to the feelings. This can lead to them 'acting out" for example, starting fights, lashing out, shouting, hitting or swearing or to 'acting in' for example, becoming withdrawn, quiet, sad, refusing to do anything. The following information can help you to support children and young people who feel this way.

Teach and Practice Strategies:

Many children/young people will not know how to calm themselves down when they feel upset. They can be taught strategies that will help them to calm down, a number of these can be found at the end of this handout. Different activities work for different people, it is important that they try out different ones to see what works for them. You may need to show them these strategies and practice them with your child until they get the hang of them.

The **Regulate, Relate, Reason Model**[1] can help them to learn to manage their feelings physically and emotionally. Remember it is only when people are calm that they can talk about or begin to figure out how to manage how they are feeling or what they are thinking.

Regulate:

- Keep everybody safe. If the child or young person is in danger of hurting themselves or others, or of damaging property, you may need to remove them or take away any dangerous objects that could hurt them or someone else.
- Stay with them and let them know they are safe and secure. "I will stay with you and make sure you are safe".

[1] *The Regulate, Relate, Reason Model – Bruce Perry*

- Try to use a calm and patient voice. If you seem stressed, anxious, or angry, this can make their anxiety worse.
- Tell them lots of children and young people have meltdowns, this is one way they show their stress.
- Repeat a calming word/phrase to yourself, such as "*breathe*", or use coping thoughts such as "*If I am calm, it will help them to be calm*".
- Don't talk about how you think they should be behaving as they won't be able to hear you or take this on board when they are stressed or having a meltdown.
- Demonstrate a strategy which you know they have practiced and you know helps them to calm down. See **Appendix 1** for strategies.

Relate:

- When the meltdown is over, try to understand how they were feeling and what upset them.
- It will be important that you remain calm as they will pick up on your stress which could lead to the meltdown getting worse or happening again.
- You might want to try to reason with them but remember talking may have the least impact at this time (words are only 7% effective). Again, this could lead to a further meltdown.
- As they calm down use short sentences and a calm tone of voice for example, "I know you feel upset right now, this is very hard".

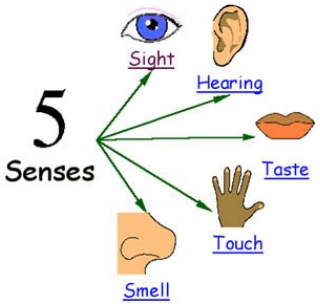
Reason:

- When their body signals are saying they are calm, you can talk things through with them and teach them how to manage their meltdown differently the next time. Remember that it might take some time before they are calm enough to talk. This can vary from approximately 40 minutes to a whole day for some.
- **Emotion Coaching**[2] is one approach that is used with children and young people who have meltdowns. It is a step-by-step way to speak to them and to support them. See **Appendix 2** of this document or on www.emotioncoaching.co.uk for more information.

[2] **Gottman, J., Katz, L. & Hooven, C. (1996) Meta-Emotion- how families communicate emotionally. New Jersey: Laurence Erlbaum Associates.*

APPENDIX 1: Calming Strategies

Mindfulness: Mindfulness is about bringing one's attention to the present moment. Here is a simple mindfulness technique:



- Sit in a relaxed position with your two feet on the ground.
- Take 3 deep breaths relaxing more into the chair.
- Pay attention to nice things around you. Firstly, what can you see? Say your answers 'in your head'. Then move onto what you can hear, then taste… touch… and smell.
- Take 3 more deep breaths and enjoy this time of being in the present moment.

Deep Breathing: Breathing exercises help reduce feelings of physical tension. The key to deep breathing is to breathe deeply from the tummy, getting as much fresh air as possible into your lungs. When you take deep breaths from the tummy, rather than shallow breaths from your upper chest, you inhale more oxygen. The more oxygen you get, the less tense, short of breath, and anxious you feel.

Example:

- Sit in a comfortable position with your arms and legs uncrossed.
- Inhale slowly through your nose or mouth (one-thousand one, one thousand, two, one-thousand three) and fill your lungs.
- Silently and gently say to yourself, "I'm filling my body with calm".
- Exhale slowly through your mouth (one-thousand one, one-thousand two, one-thousand three), and comfortably empty your lungs.
- Silently and gently say to yourself, "I'm letting the tension drain away".
- Repeat five times slowly.

Younger children can practice deep breathing by blowing up balloons or blowing bubbles into a drink through a straw. In order to do these they have to take in a deep breath to begin. Over time, encourage them to take these breaths without bubbles, balloons or straws. Alternatively, they can try tummy breathing…

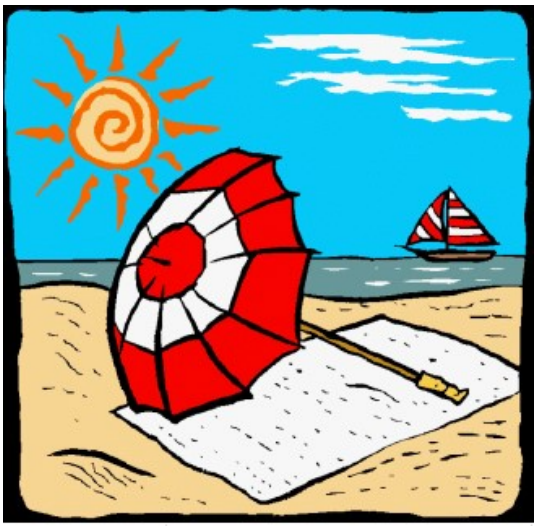
Tummy Breathing – For Younger Children

- Sit or lie down comfortably.
- Gently put your hands on your tummy.
- When you gently breathe in your tummy will rise. (This may be hard to do at first because we tend to expand the chest to breathe). It may help if you imagine a balloon in your tummy expanding as you breathe in, as the balloon expands your tummy does too!! When you breathe out the air goes out of the balloon and your tummy goes back to its normal size!! By leaving your hands on your tummy you can feel it rising (when you breathe in) and falling (when you breathe out).
- Repeat 5 times if this feels comfortable building up to 10 breaths.

Muscular Relaxation: Tense and relax different muscle groups in your body. For example, tense your toes on your right foot, hold for one, two, three… and relax. Now do the same with your left foot. Move up your body tensing, holding and relaxing different parts as you go. As your body relaxes, so will your mind.

Visualisation – Guided Imagery: Close your eyes and use your imagination to imagine that you are walking down a soft wide path towards the sea. As you walk you feel calm and safe – breathing in and out – calmly and deeply.

Suggested Script:



You can hear the waves rolling onto the beach. You can smell the sea. You can feel a cool breeze on your face. As you walk along the path - breathing in and out – slowly and deeply – you feel sand beneath your feet – it's soft and warm. The sun is shining and the sea is blue and glistening. The sound of the waves rolling onto the beach feels comforting and relaxing. And as you look out at the sea you can match your breathing to the pattern of the waves – slowly in and deeply out– relaxed and happy. You can feel the sun's warmth filling the whole of your body as you gaze towards the water which is bright and blue and green. The beach is golden, long and wide and there is no-one here but you. This is your beach – your place – your time. Breathing in, filling your body with warmth and relaxation and breathing out – letting go of any stress. As you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, lower yourself onto the sand. Sitting here quietly you can watch the waves lapping onto the beach – the water is clear and bright and as you watch you continue to feel the warm relaxing feeling flowing over you – and you feel safe and happy and content.

There is no one here but you – this is your beach – this is your place – this is your time. Sitting here in the warm, soft sand, soaking up the sunshine you feel strong and calm and you feel ready to return. Breathing in and out …slowly and deeply.

Grounding: Grounding strategies can be used to help self regulate. These involve focusing attention on something in the moment and trying to focus only on that task. For example, counting breaths in and out, focusing on naming five things in the room, counting the lines on your hand, finding items that are a certain colour in the room.

Scaling: Using a scale with pictures (see Fig. 1) can help children and young people to recognise how strong the emotions are that they are feeling. Ask them where they

are on the scale. Help them work out some calming activities they can use at each point on the scale.

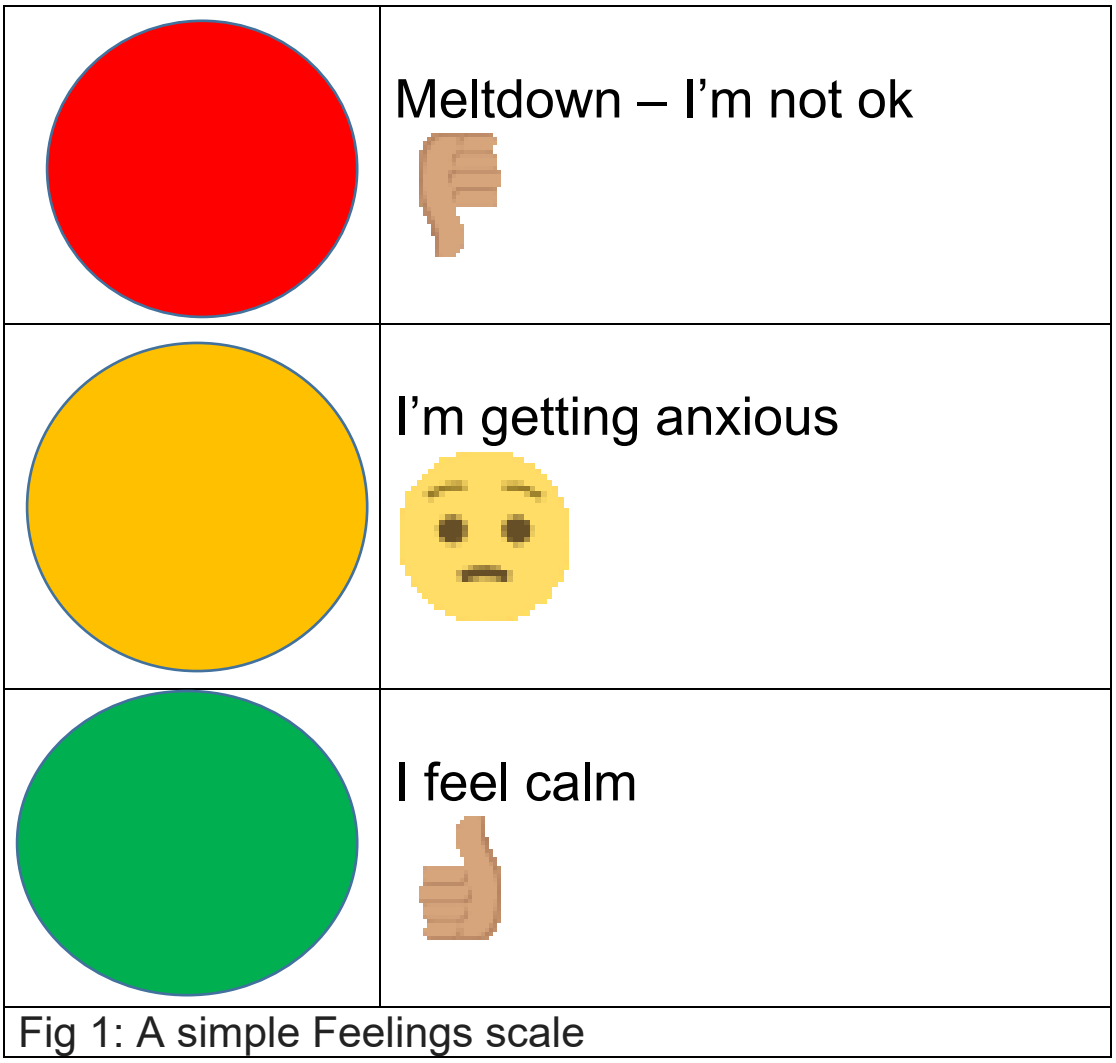


Fig 1: A simple Feelings scale

The Turtle Technique: This can be used to teach self-control to younger children. The technique should be taught when they are calm and relaxed and you can remind them to use it if they are becoming stressed or about to have a meltdown.

- Tell the story of a turtle who is always getting into trouble because he does not stop to think. These problems make him cross and angry and he ends up fighting with everyone. With help from a wise old turtle, the young turtle learns that when he has a problem or when he feels angry or sad, he can pull his body in to his shell to think.
- The child learns the turtle technique, they pull their arms close to their bodies, curl up in their shells stop, think and then relax. This helps them to feel relaxed after tensing their muscles and it helps to develop self-control and problem solving skills. For some it may help to make a physical turtle shell that they can go into.

Other useful links: **NEPS** Relaxation text **NEPS** Relaxation podcast

Appendix 2: Strategy for Reasoning[3]

1. **Recognise the child or young person's feelings and empathise with them.**
   - Try to notice what emotions they may be feeling. *"I can see you are very upset right now."*

2. **Support and put a name to what they may be feeling**
   - *"It's ok to feel angry and frustrated. This is a difficult time for you."*

3. **Set limits (if necessary)**
   - *Remember - All feelings are ok, it's what we do with them that matters.*

4. **Help them to problem-solve**
   - When they have calmed down talk in a kind and supportive way about what behaviours are and are not acceptable.
   - Talk about the feelings that caused the behaviour. *"You were angry and upset because……..."*
   - Try to focus on the positive, acceptable behaviour, i.e. what you would like to see, instead of the problem behaviour.
   - Brainstorm with them some other ways that they could have dealt with their feelings.
   - Talk about how feelings come and go and even though they may be sad or scared right now, they will probably feel better soon.

[3] *Adapted from Emotion Coaching (Gottmann, 1996)*