

TEACHING SELF-REGULATION TO KIDS

Notes from Lisa Lowry, LCSW, at the Sept. 28, 2015 FRED meeting

Lisa is a psychotherapist who treats children, adults and families in her Oak Park practice. Her phone is 337-0799.

With practice and as self-awareness grows, many children can incorporate self-soothing techniques into their lives.

Tools to de-escalate

“It’s wonderful to see a kid bloom into self-management,” Lisa said. “Buy-in is very important. Kids because they become aware that these techniques make them feel better.”

It’s important to help your child plan in advance what to do in a stressful situation.

- Breathing is fundamental. Deep, controlled breathing halts the adrenalin rush that accompanies escalation. Dampening adrenalin is important because a burst of adrenalin produces the “fight or flight” response—not what you want when it’s time for homework.

Lisa recommended the intentionally slow breathing taught in yoga or meditation. At least 5 deep breaths, held and then expelled slowly through the nose, can provide calm and improve clarity of thought. (Lisa also recommends this for parents!)

- Taking space—Removing the child from the stress trigger. Many kids decompress better when they are alone. Identify a place where your child can go to soothe himself. It could be in the basement, listening to music, or shooting baskets in the driveway.
- Distraction—Some kids do best when they “change the channel.” This can be very helpful for kids who get stuck on upsetting thoughts. Distractions can include watching television, spending time with a pet, playing with clay, exercising, journaling or taking a bath.

Sensory changes can help a child change channels too—going outside, changes in light or temperature.

Calming activities

- Regulating sleep. If a child doesn’t sleep well or long enough, he is likely to be dysregulated the next day. It’s important to shut down screens—TVs, computers and video games—at least an hour before bedtime. Light

inhibits the body's production of Melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep.

For kids who have frequent difficulty falling asleep, Lisa recommends Melatonin supplements. Quiet activities like playing with Legos, music, reading or just being in a dim or darkened room can also help.

For kids (or adults) who chronically struggle to sleep, Lisa recommends "Real Sleep" a CD of ambient sounds developed by a neuroscientist. I found this product for \$19.95 at www.realsleep.net. It may also be available on Amazon.

- Reduce executive function stressors. Many kids do better when life is more predictable. Build structure into the family, help your child with time management and give him 5-minute warnings. Let your child know what's next.
- Self-talk—Positive self-talk is the heart of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). This can mean helping a child get ahead of his own escalation by telling himself "If I stop myself from crying, my homework will go more quickly," or "I can do this."