



CHAPTER 5

Empathetic Children Can Keep Their Cool

Managing Strong Emotions and Mastering Self-Regulation

Ten minutes beyond San Diego's lush beaches is City Heights, a community with one of the highest number of low-income and ethnically diverse families in the area. And right in the middle of City Heights is Epiphany Prep Charter School. The staff is committed to educating their students for college and a career as well as preparing them for life. I was there to see how they were educating the "whole child."

Many of these students witness violence in their neighborhoods, and it can exact a heavy cost. Untethered stress reduces children's focusing abilities, resilience, and emotional health, and all this jeopardizes their academic achievement. But stress also affects empathy. It's tough to feel for others when you're in "survival mode." Witnessing others' distress can also trigger "compassion fatigue" and shut down empathy because you're too distraught from seeing their pain.

While teachers can't change students' home environments, they can teach ways for the kids in their classrooms to cope. And it's true for us as parents, as well: while we can't oversee what happens beyond our front doors, we can offer our children tools to handle whatever comes their way. Self-regulation is one of those essential tools, and it's composed of skills like self-awareness, self-management, emotional literacy, and problem solving.

Second-grade teacher Mayra Reyes was teaching those skills in a unique process called restorative justice (RJ) where everyone—victim, offender, and community—talks out a problem together and offers solutions. The goal is for offenders “to repair the harm done by apologizing or somehow making amends,” thus restoring their relationship with victims.

I became a RJ “believer” while observing Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda listen calmly to one another’s perspectives after experiencing the horrors of genocide. “If they can, anyone can” became my mantra. I realized that restorative justice is a powerful empathy-building practice, and that day I saw it work with young children.

Conflicts were frequent when school began. “The children didn’t know ways to resolve issues other than physically,” Reyes told me. And so the teacher adapted the RJ model so her second graders could learn self-regulation, conflict resolution, and perspective taking. She first taught them emotional literacy skills, so students could identify feelings and calmly talk through problems. A Calm Down Corner was also available for students to decompress. Then she taught three simple problem-solving steps to help students resolve conflicts peacefully:

1. **Identify the Problem.** “Today I had a problem when . . .”
2. **Identify Your Feelings.** “I feel . . .” or “I felt . . .”
3. **Seek Solutions.** “A possible short-term solution is . . .” “A possible long-term solution is . . .”

Short-term solutions could be apologizing, doing an activity like making a card together, and modeling the positive behavior in a skit. Long-term solutions might include creating a behavior contract with the student or becoming a class restorative justice expert. Students slowly learned the skills with repeated practice and were ready to apply them.

“Does anyone have a problem they need help solving?” Mayra Reyes asked. I was about to see a Restorative Justice Circle, and students gathered eagerly around the rug.

Juanita raised her hand, and Reyes handed her a talking piece to hold, a red gift box to remind students that “speaking is a gift, and the

person talking is imparting important knowledge.” Circle rules mandated that a classmate’s name be used only if present, language must be professional (“as if you’re speaking to the principal”), and just the person holding the talking piece may speak. Those are great rules for family meetings as well.

“Today I had a problem,” Juanita began. “Pedro called me a name in the computer lab.” She was asking her classmates to help her find a solution.

Next, it was Pedro’s turn. (Students may opt out of the circle and request a private meeting, but Pedro was willing.) “Today I had a problem with Juanita,” he said. “She was kicking me under the table, so I told Juanita she was stupid.”

Pedro and Juanita then voiced their feelings: “It made me feel unsafe,” Juanita said. “I felt very upset with Juanita,” Pedro said.

Now Pedro and Juanita would each ask two peers to share either a long-term or short-term solution.

Juanita chose Kristina and Raul. Kristina suggested Pedro apologize to Juanita for calling her stupid. Raul suggested that they shake hands and say, “I’m sorry.”

Pedro called on two classmates for ideas. Isaac proposed that Pedro or Juanita request a seat change, and Iliana advised Pedro to sit farther back. “So he doesn’t get kicked.”

Then Pedro and Juanita must decide their solution. The onetime adversaries whispered together and then announced their decision while jointly holding the talking piece to show they were “one voice.”

“Our short-term solution is to apologize to one another, since we both did something wrong,” said Juanita.

“Our long-term solution is to request a seat change so we stop fighting,” said Pedro.

Classmates erupted in claps, elated that the twosome had solved their problem. And as promised, Pedro and Juanita shook hands in front of their peers.

These kids managed their emotions, communicated their needs, understood other’s perspectives, and created win-win solutions. As one

eight-year-old told Reyes: "just because we are little doesn't mean we can't do big things."

"At the beginning solutions are one-sided, because students want to solve 'their' issue," Reyes told me. "But then they start to listen, put themselves into each other's shoes, and develop a deeper understanding of one another."¹

The school's name, Epiphany, means "a moment in which you suddenly understand something in a new or very clear way." Reyes's Restorative Justice Circles were creating such a moment for her students. They were learning not only self-regulation, but also how to solve problems peacefully and expand their empathy: an epiphany every child needs.

LEARNING TO DEVELOP SELF-REGULATION

In Part 1 of this book, we discussed four basic tenets of developing empathy: teaching emotional literacy, moral identity, perspective taking, and moral imagination, each of which increases the odds that our children will be kind and helpful and acquire the Empathy Advantage. But developing empathy is just part of the equation. The next step is for children to *practice* empathy in their day-to-day lives, and in order to do that they must learn additional habits—the first of which is self-regulation. Self-regulation allows kids to keep their emotions in check so they can recognize others' feelings and then calmly think of how to help. If kids don't know how to manage emotions, their empathy is jeopardized. If they are too distressed by another's pain, they either cope by shutting down their compassionate instincts to care for themselves or can't think clearly enough to help. Anxiety and stress can sabotage empathy.

Managing emotions helps children to look beyond themselves, put aside what would feed their urges, and "do for others." It helps kids become UnSelfies. And it's the habit kids tell me that they need most: "Nobody tells us *how* to calm down!" "I'm so upset when kids bully

Kevin, that I can't think *how* to help!" "Somebody needs to tell me *how* to keep my mouth shut so I don't gossip."

Cultivating self-regulation builds kids' empathy muscles, but it also has additional surprising advantages. The ability to manage emotions is a better predictor of academic achievement than IQ;² it dramatically increases your adult child's health and financial stability;³ and it strengthens resilience so your child can bounce back from setbacks.⁴ And it helps fill in the empathy gap (feeling another's pain but not acting on urges to help), so kids are more likely to *feel* empathy and *respond* compassionately.

This chapter offers proven ways to boost your child's self-regulation abilities. Best yet, learning these habits will enhance *every* area of your child's development—cognitive, moral, social and emotional—both now and forever.

WHY IS IT SO HARD FOR KIDS TO KEEP THEIR COOL?

Peace Chairs, Quiet Time, Calm Down Corners, and Restorative Justice Circles are popping up in schools from coast to coast to help "the most stressed generation on record." Educators recognize that poor self-regulation skills reduce academic achievement *and* empathy. Here are reasons why today's kids struggle with self-regulation and how it widens the empathy gap and derails them from helping others.

Stressed-Out Kids

Forget those images of carefree childhoods. Today's teens are experiencing stress at an all-time high:⁵ one in three say they feel "overwhelmed." Especially sobering is that our kids' stress now tops *our* stress levels.⁶ One in six college students has been diagnosed or treated by a professional for anxiety in the past twelve months; childhood anxiety is up 25 percent.⁷ The reasons include economic hardship, trauma, make-or-break testing, bullying, and pressure to perform day-to-day. But one fact remains: when stress rises, kids suffer.

Untamed stress impairs not only judgment, memory, and impulse control but also our compassionate instincts.⁸ Anxiety makes us oblivious to others' feelings, reduces perspective taking, increases egocentrism (aka the Selfie Syndrome),⁹ and widens the empathy gap. It's hard for kids to tune in to someone else's pain and help if they're in distress themselves. And it's why we must build in time for our kids to decompress, and learn their stress triggers, and teach them healthy ways to manage destructive emotions.

Glorification of Violent Behavior

Our media is called "the most violent in the world" for good reason.¹⁰ By the end of elementary school, the average child will witness 8,000 murders and, by age eighteen, 200,000 other vivid acts of violence, on all screens including video, television, and online streaming.¹¹

Then there's the gaming industry. In-depth studies from Canada's Brock University found that overexposure to violent images also slows moral growth and weakens a child's ability to feel for others.¹² For many children their plugged-in time—about seven hours a day—is basically like having a full-time job. "The more kids see and experience violence (whether at school, home, on TV, computer, video games, or as a victim), the more they think it's 'normal, common, and acceptable.'"¹³ And the more it lowers kids' inhibitions against aggression toward others.

Viewing aggression may also change our children's brains. Brain scans found that just one week after playing violent video games, even kids who were not frequent video game players showed decreased activity in the parts of their brains that regulate emotion, attention, and concentration.¹⁴ Time to keep a closer eye on our children's media diet and keep the empathy gap in check.

Parents Behaving Badly

The most effective way kids learn self-regulation is by watching others, and it appears their parents aren't the best models. News stories repeat-

edly warn us of parents behaving badly at their kids' sporting events and even at high school graduations. In fact, parental misbehavior has become so troublesome that Soccer America now instructs refs in how to deal with "spectator abuse."¹⁵ Other organizations, including Little League for baseball, Pop Warner for football, and the United States Tennis Association, are also concerned about poor adult sportsmanship, and are revising their policies to deal with "big people" misbehaving at their events. Make no mistake, kids are watching our behavior both on screen and off, and it is impacting their character.

For proof, try this: a survey of a thousand children—whether parents worked outside the home or not—gave their moms the lowest grades for controlling tempers when they made them angry.¹⁶ If parents aren't modeling self-regulation or empathy, how will kids learn it? So ask yourself: "What kind of grade would my kids give me for managing my behavior?"

The Age of Multitasking

Today's kids are whizzes at texting, friending, and swiping while studying, eating, or chatting. Even on their best behavior, most kids can't focus on their school assignments more than two minutes without using social media.¹⁷ But dividing attention means that their brain must shift focus between two, three, or four things, and there are "switching costs" including lessened cognitive abilities, mental fatigue, and *reduced empathy*. Simply having a cell phone nearby—without even checking it—can reduce empathy.¹⁸

The plain fact is if kids are focusing on that text or counting Facebook followers, they're not tuning in to people. If they "don't build up the neural circuitry that focused attention requires," says Daniel Goleman, "they could have problems controlling their emotions and being empathetic."¹⁹ And a large survey of tween-age girls found that their multitasking hours and electronic diversions were associated with diminished social and emotional skills.²⁰

Multitasking is another trend that might be widening the empathy

The Mistaken "Cognitive Hype"

"Mindfulness" (or "being aware of what is happening as it is happening")²¹ is the hot buzzword. It has gained extensive popularity in psychology, business, medicine, and education alike as research confirms its wide-ranging benefits for adults and kids. But it was the surprise discoveries about the power of emotions that started the revolution. The general belief was that skills like emotional literacy, empathy, self-regulation, and focusing abilities were locked in by genetics. Besides, emotional and social skills were "nice to have" but not too important in the big scheme of "what children need to succeed." So we put our energy into what we believe helps give our kids "the résumé edge"—piano lessons, robotics, Mandarin classes, special tutors—because we'd been fed the "Cognitive Hype." After all, school achievement, Ivy League acceptance, and career advancements all depended on "cognitive" capabilities. Right?

But then a fresh stream of research began to put holes in the cognitive theory. While it was important, our one-sided endeavors to help our kids overlooked the surprising power of emotions and empathy to boost our children's success and happiness. We were actually shortchanging our children's futures.

Self-Regulation: A Secret to Success

Rethinking the "Cognitive Hype" started with marshmallows, preschoolers, and a legendary Stanford University study.²² In 1970, Walter Mischel, now a renowned psychologist, invited a group of four-year-olds to a "game room" where they were shown a tray of marshmallows (and other treats) and asked to choose one. Then came the challenge: "Do you want the marshmallow now, or can you wait until I come back and you can have two?" Waiting is hard for any kid, but especially for preschoolers. Still, about a third of the children waited and received a larger reward for demonstrating their self-restraint.

When researchers followed the children they found significant differences. By high school, those who could halt their "gotta have it now"

emotions had significantly higher SAT scores—an average 210 points higher—than those who couldn't wait at age four. Forty years later (Mischel is still tracking the original kids), those with more self-restraint were far more socially competent, self-assertive, and better able to deal with the frustrations of life. Mischel recently announced to the world his own epiphany: for over four decades, he thought that preschoolers' "waiting" abilities were due to inborn temperaments. But scientific advancements have revealed that self-regulation is teachable.

Next came a long-term study in Dunedin, New Zealand, that followed 1,037 children—all the babies born over a period of twelve months—for forty years. It found that ability to put the brakes on emotions is essential to success. Lead researcher Terrie E. Moffitt said: "Childhood self-control strongly predicts adult success, in people of high or low intelligence, in rich or poor."²³ Those who showed early signs of self-regulation not only were less likely to develop later addictions or commit a crime but also were healthier and wealthier adults than were their more impulsive peers.²⁴ In fact, a child's self-regulation ability is a better predictor of their academic achievement than IQ is.²⁵ Self-regulation also correlates with better health, greater wealth, lowered risk of substance abuse,²⁶ and increased financial stability. The "Cognitive Hype" took another ding, but could we really impact our children's self-regulation skills?

Then came another study whose results stirred not only the scientific world but also revamped educational curriculums and parenting toolkits—and the subjects were Buddhist monks.

Lessons from Monks' Brains

Richard Davidson is a prominent neuroscientist at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and he is fascinated with how meditation and emotions help us lead lives that are more meaningful. So Davidson turned to unusual subjects: Tibetan Buddhist monks lent to him by the Dalai Lama for a series of groundbreaking studies. One by one, they were led to Davidson's lab and hooked up to an electroencephalograph (EEG) that would record their brain activity as they meditated.

In one study, the brain activity of monks who had practiced meditating for ten thousand to fifty thousand hours, and that of college students with little meditative experience, were monitored. The scans shocked researchers: the records of the monks' brain activity differed significantly from those of the student volunteers. Monks who spent the most years meditating produced exceptionally powerful gamma waves (brain waves associated with peak concentration and higher mental activity); up to 30 times stronger than the college students did and on a scale never previously reported in a healthy person.

Davidson had discovered that the brain is not fixed but rather that it has an ability called "neuroplasticity." And the years of meditating had rewired the monks' brains. What's more, Davidson proved that the brain can change not only in childhood but also throughout life.²⁷

The research team also had the monks and students meditate on compassion (for instance, wishing loved ones well or thinking about other people's suffering and not just their own). While all subjects showed activity in the parts of the brain that generate positive emotions and happiness, the monks had much greater activation in areas linked to empathy and recognizing others' emotions. Extensively practicing compassion meditation had dramatically changed the areas of the monks' brains that detect feelings.²⁸

Davidson's extraordinary discoveries have enormous implications for parenting: self-regulation as well as kindness and compassion can be learned in the same way as playing a cello or being proficient in hockey. While we've trained our children to be violinists, math whizzes, spelling champs, and gymnasts, we can also train them to be good human beings. One way is by helping our children practice compassion and managing emotions more diligently.

The Mindfulness Revolution in Schools

Science shows that practicing mindfulness—even minutes a day for a few weeks—can reap such positive benefits as boosting immune systems,²⁹ reducing stress,³⁰ increasing resilience, enhancing focus,³¹ stretching

attention,³² and improving memory.³³ But mindfulness can also nurture empathy³⁴ and compassion³⁵ as well as increase children's willingness to help others.³⁶ It's why thousands of educators, like Jennifer Bell, are adding mindfulness to their class routines. It also seems to help youth growing up in challenging environments.

When Vistacion Valley Middle School in San Francisco introduced Quiet Time as a twice-daily, fifteen-minute ritual—a time when students may choose to sit quietly or meditate—it became the first public school in the country to adopt the practice. Violence in the neighborhoods (nine shootings in one month) was spilling into the school and affecting the students.³⁷ The staff had tried numerous strategies, but none was effective. In the first year of the new approach, suspensions were reduced by 45 percent.

Within four years, suspensions decreased 79 percent; attendance rates climbed to 98 percent; grade point averages and test scores improved. What's more, students said they are calmer and less angry, and their "happiness levels" (recorded on the annual California Healthy Kids Survey) skyrocketed.³⁸ Burton High School, just a few blocks away (and once dubbed "Fight School"), implemented Quiet Time, and found similar results.

Yes, students in high-risk areas do face enormous stress, but *all* kids—regardless of zip code—can benefit from self-regulation. In fact, "privileged teens" reared in upper-class environments now have higher rates of depression, anxiety, and substance abuse than any other socioeconomic group of young Americans today.³⁹ Mindfulness is really a way to help children keep stress at bay and respond without instantly reacting.

Research on the effectiveness of school mindfulness programs shows promise in everything from improving kindness to math, and proving to be a game changer for *all* kids:

- Fourth and fifth graders regulated stress better, were more optimistic, kinder, helpful, and improved in math.⁴⁰
- At-risk third graders showed significant improvement in behavior and focusing.⁴¹

- British teens showed lower depression and stress levels and improved well-being.⁴²

- Elementary students improved significantly in paying attention, self-control, classroom participation, and respect for others.⁴³

Practicing mindfulness just a few minutes a day is making a difference in children's lives. It turns out that best solution for self-regulation is literally right under our nose. All kids need to do is "Just breathe!"

HOW TO TEACH CHILDREN SELF-REGULATION

I was on-air with Alexandra Barzvi, host of *Doctor Radio*, and parents were calling in on how to reduce tantrums. "Stress comes *before* the anger," I told one parent. "Helping your child learn to calm down *before* the meltdown is your goal!"

The next caller had advice. Her eight-year-old son was exploding after school until Mom realized that he didn't know how to decompress. So she put a beanbag chair in a quiet corner with a CD player and a few of his favorite books.

"The next day, I asked him to sit with me because I had a bad day and needed to relax," she said. "It became our new after-school ritual, and his meltdowns slowly faded. Two weeks later, I found him in the beanbag listening to music. He told me 'I'm relaxing.' Now he does it daily: he just needed me to show him how to calm down."

I'm sure every listener bought a beanbag chair that day. But that mom reminded everyone that helping our kids manage emotions starts by showing them how.

- **Model calmness.** Your child's best template for learning self-regulation is you. So how do you act in front of your kids after a hard day? When you're driving with your children and another car cuts in front of you? When the bank says you're overdrawn?

Your kids are watching, so make sure your behavior is what you want them to copy.

- **Tune in to your child.** How does your child handle stress? If he has a stressful experience or sees another in distress does he:

- ▷ Develop physical ailments like a headache, stomachache, or heart palpitations?
- ▷ Try to avoid the person or the scene?
- ▷ Become distressed and try to block out the person's pain?
- ▷ Have trouble bouncing back and need a long time to recover?
- ▷ Need help calming down to recover?

Learn your child's emotional needs so you can empathize and know how to help.

- **Identify body alarms.** Say: "We have little body signs that warn us we're getting upset and need to calm down." Help your child recognize her body alarms such as flushed cheeks, clenched fists, tightened muscles, pounding heart, churning tummy, dry mouth, and quicker breaths. Then point out her sign quietly when she *first* gets frustrated: "Your hands are in fists. Are you feeling yourself getting stressed?" The more kids are aware of early stress, the better they'll be at regulating their emotions.

- **Create a quiet space.** Find a place to help your family decompress. Size doesn't matter, but it should have a soothing feel. It might have a beanbag or rocking chair, soft pillows, stuffed animals, or a CD player. Introduce it as a "place to calm down for every family member." Hint: Kids should equate the spot as a place to decompress, *not* for discipline or time-out.

- **Make a Stress Box.** My friends at the Thompson Child and Family Focus developed a Stress Box to teach students self-regulation. It includes an MP3 player with soothing music, a Koosh ball, a bubble blower, and a notepad and pen or crayons to "write away

their anger," and books about feelings. Younger kids: *Glad Monster, Sad Monster*, by Ed Emberley and Anne Miranda; *On Monday When It Rained*, by Cheryl Kachenmeister. Older kids and teens: *Fighting Invisible Tigers*, by Earl Hipp; or *Hot Stones & Funny Bones*, by Brian Luke Seaward. Make a family stress box, teach everyone how to use each stress reducer, and then put it in your quiet place for your family.

- **Teach a self-regulation strategy.** Each child needs a calming strategy that works for him. This chapter offers numerous self-regulation techniques, so find one that appeals to your child. Then help him practice until it becomes a habit.

EMPATHY BUILDER: USING MINDFUL BREATHING TO MANAGE FEELINGS

Science proves that teaching children to be mindful of the moment can enhance self-regulation as well as compassion. Here are four steps to help your family become a more mindful family.

Step 1: Teach Yourself to "Just Breathe"

Practice mindful breathing first alone, so you can teach it to your family. Find a comfortable, quiet spot, keep your shoulders as relaxed as possible, and then focus on taking deep, slow breaths by breathing in through your nose and exhaling through your mouth. The exhales should be twice as long as your inhales to maximize the relaxation response. When your mind wanders—which it will—gently tell yourself to think about your breathing. Increase the session lengths as your comfort level improves.

Step 2: Explain the Benefits

Tell your child, "Taking slow, deep breaths helps you relax and calms your brain so you can think clearer and stay in control. You can use it before taking a test, to get to sleep, or any time you're frustrated, worried, sad, or just need to chill. And you can use it anywhere. The more you practice, the easier it is to calm and relax."

Step 3: Teach Belly Breathing

Sit straight in a chair or lie flat on the floor with hands low on belly. Inhale deeply through your nose, gently hold it, and then let the air out slowly through your lips. "Feel your tummy rise and fall with each breath. Try to keep your mind on your breaths, but if it wanders, just tell yourself to focus on your belly breaths."

In the beginning, you might sit next to your child and softly count and breathe as he breathes. Gradually stretch inhales and exhales, and session lengths based on each family member's abilities. My friend Vicki Zakrzewski, from the Greater Good Science Center, told me that "the exhale should be twice as long as the inhale to activate the vagus nerve and create a relaxation response," so make that the ultimate goal.⁴⁴

Step 4: Make Mindfulness a Family Ritual

Find ways to do breathing exercises a few times a day—like before leaving home, in the carpool, at dinner, or bedtime—so it becomes a ritual. Short, repeated practices work best to get you into a habit, so think: *Brief times, many times*. Read also *10 Mindful Minutes*, by Goldie Hawn; or *Calm Your Anxious Brain*, by Jeffrey Brantley and Jon Kabat-Zinn.

control," "I can handle this." Suggest a few phrases, have your child choose one she feels most comfortable saying, and then help her rehearse it a few times each day until it becomes automatic.

▷ **"1 + 3 + 10."** As soon as you feel stress, tell yourself: "Stop and be calm." That's 1. Now take three deep, slow breaths from your tummy. That's 3. Then count slowly to ten inside your head and focus on each number as you exhale. That's 10. Put them all together and you have 1 + 3 + 10.

- **Make a Calm-Down Jar.** Glitter jars are a fun way for kids to soothe themselves, and are easy to make. Into a Mason jar, pour 1 cup of hot water and 2 tablespoons of glitter glue or a bottle of clear glue, and then whisk. Add some fine glitter ("fairy dust") until there is a layer of glitter on the bottom, from one-half to three-quarters of an inch deep. Fill the jar with water plus a bit more of chunkier glitter (or sequins, beads, or small plastic jewels), leaving about one inch of room at the top. Add a drop of food coloring and screw the lid on tightly. As your child shakes and watches the glitter swirl slowly to the bottom, he practices breathing slowly as his stress "magically fades."⁴⁵ You might have your child make a Calm-Down Jar for someone who might appreciate it. L, S

- **Breathe kind thoughts!** Once your child learns Belly Breathing (see page 111), you can teach breathing variations that boost mindfulness and compassion. A

▷ **Try Gratitude Breathing.** Take a deep breath and count "one" as you exhale and say something you're grateful for. ("I'm grateful for my family.") Take another breath, count "two," and as you exhale, say another thing you're grateful for. ("I'm grateful for my health," or "I'm thankful for my puppy.") Keep breathing, counting, exhaling, and telling yourself things you're grateful for until you get to five, and then start at one with either repeating your gratitude list or adding new ideas.

▷ **Think about helpers.** Think about people who are helpful to you (even if you don't know them well, like the school nurse or bus driver). Then think how they help you while you do Belly Breathing.⁴⁶

▷ **Breathe kind wishes.** Close your eyes and think of a person you want to send kind wishes to, people who have been especially kind to you. Then silently repeat phrases like "May he have a good day," "I hope she is happy," "May they be safe" while doing your Belly Breathing.

- **Learn yoga.** Teen girls from New York told me that yoga keeps their stress in check. Yoga also increases awareness of breathing, thoughts, and body movements, and it helps work off stress and tension. Find an age-appropriate yoga DVD and do yoga with your child, seek classes in your area, or start a mother-daughter (or mother-son, dad-daughter) yoga group. S, T

- **Try an app.** Download an app to help your child practice self-regulation. *Young children: Inner Peace for Kids*, *School age: Super Stretch Yoga*, *Tweens and teens: Smiling Mind*, *Stop, Breathe & Think*, or *Take a Break!* A

- **Get educated.** Keep informed about scientific discoveries that are revolutionizing the way we parent. A few: *Brainstorm*, by Daniel J. Siegel; *Nurtureshock*, by Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman; *The Marshmallow Test*, by Walter Mischel; *Focus*, by Daniel Goleman; or *The Emotional Life of Your Brain*, by Richard Davidson. T

THE TOP FIVE THINGS TO KNOW ABOUT CULTIVATING SELF-REGULATION

1. Kids must learn to control their emotions before they can recognize others' feelings.
2. The more kids are aware of their stress signs, the better they are at self-regulation.
3. Deep breathing with a long, slow exhale creates a quick calming effect.
4. The best way to teach your child self-regulation is by modeling self-regulation yourself.
5. Your home is the optimum place for your child to learn to manage his emotions. Reinforce his efforts so he can get into the habit of calming himself on his own.

ONE LAST THING

I was observing a special education class in Oregon and noticed long pieces of rug yarn tied to students' chairs. One child caught me looking at his yarn filled with knots.

"It's for calming down, so I can get along with kids," he whispered. "My teacher says that I'll get better if I practice, so every time I do my belly breaths, I tie a knot," he explained. "It's like making muscles. You gotta work at it, you know."

The boy proudly showed off his ten knots and admitted he had a ways to go, but those deep breaths were helping.

His teacher told me that the boy had a kind heart, but his "short fuse" was hindering his relationships and empathy. The deep-breathing strategy was improving both qualities, and he'd even made a friend.

The child was lucky to have such an empathetic teacher who understood his needs and helped him manage anger. Self-regulation habits can be learned through practice and can even rewire our children's brains and help them develop the Empathy Advantage. But as this child would remind us: "You gotta work at it, you know."