

# Emotional Overload

ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators™

## Infants and toddlers have rich emotional lives.

Babies are born into a world full of emotions. From the first time a newborn's parents hold them, they are likely to be enveloped by deep emotion. Nearly every interaction from then on carries an emotional component that babies are wired to notice, connect with, participate in, and make sense of.

Not only are infants and toddlers tuned in to the emotions of others from birth, they also feel and express their own basic emotions from the start. And as babies grow in both brain capacity and experience over the first few years, they quickly gain the ability to sense and express a broader, richer range of emotions.

And yet, the ability of a baby's brain to control, or *regulate*, emotions is slow to develop. As a result, very young children often become overwhelmed by big emotions.



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## When Emotions Become Overwhelming

To understand what's happening when a young child hits "the point of no return" emotionally, and how you can best help him, it's important to understand that brains, like engines, function by using fuel, which in brains is glucose. All parts of the brain need energy to function, and there is a limited amount of energy for the brain to use at any given time.



When a situation is emotionally charged, the **limbic system** in the brain pulls more of the available energy so it can process and respond to the emotions, leaving much less energy for the "thinking" parts of the brain to use. As emotions rise, they take more and more of the available energy, leaving less and less energy for reasoning, remembering, making rational choices, and communicating. This is a key concept to remember when responding to a young child who has reached her brain's tipping point. Helping her to bring down her level of emotional intensity is necessary before she can listen to and respond to anything you say about the situation that upset or excited her in the first place.

By the way, this is true for everyone, no matter our age! What is different for very young children is their limited ability to do something to change their own level of emotion. Most adults have learned at least a few strategies to help when they are feeling very excited, sad, angry, or afraid and have much more experience and brain capacity to use those strategies in the midst of strong feelings.

### How Educators Can Help

Young children, on the other hand, are in the very early phases of developing both experience and brain capacity. Without caring adults to provide help in managing and cooling down emotions, they can easily and quickly get to the point where they are overcome with their emotions. Supporting infants and toddlers emotionally starts with the ability described in the first *Critical Competencies* SE-3 skill statement:

**SE-3a Recognize children’s emotional cues and individual responses based upon knowledge and understanding of individual children**

Providing support for children during emotional moments begins with recognizing their emotional cues, which can differ somewhat from child to child. Once educators recognize a child’s cues, they can respond in a way that takes into account the individual child’s temperament, level of development, and experience.

Educators can support infants and toddlers by preventing unnecessary situations that are likely to create high levels of frustration or excitement. The *Critical Competencies* SE-3 skill statements describe three simple, yet effective ways to do so:

**SE3-e Follow a predictable schedule of daily activities so that children can anticipate (in a general way) what will happen at different times of the day**

**SE-3f Individualize children’s routines and activities in response to their developmental levels and needs**

**SE-3g Prepare children for times of the day that may be stressful by providing verbal and nonverbal support to help children manage emotions**

Educators also play a key role in providing the supports that infants and toddlers need as they gradually develop the ability to recognize and manage their own emotions. The more powerful and consuming a child’s emotions are, the less able she is to talk or think about the situation in that moment. Before her higher-level brain areas can process any adult direction or instruction, the needs of her lower-level brain need to be met—she needs help to bring the level of emotion down so it’s not taking all the available energy.

As children’s brains develop further and their ability to reason and solve problems grows, educators can place more emphasis on proactive strategies that help build young children’s **emotional intelligence**, including knowing some simple ways to calm themselves when they feel themselves becoming frustrated or excited. The *Critical Competencies* SE-3 skill statements also offer specific strategies for helping children to recognize and eventually manage emotions:

**SE-3b Support emotional regulation for younger infants by soothing them with a gentle voice and touch or by redirecting their attention to elicit a more positive or calm emotional state**

**SE-3c Name or label children’s emotions to better help children recognize (and eventually talk about) their own emotional states and to build a “feelings vocabulary”**

**SE-3d Support emotional regulation for older infants and toddlers by verbally labeling and acknowledging the child’s and his peers’ emotional states (both positive and negative); provide assistance (both verbal and nonverbal) and model strategies for appropriately expressing and managing emotions**

## Managing Our Own Emotions

In spite of all our best efforts, it's also good to remember that managing and moderating their own emotions, especially strong emotions, will continue to be a major challenge for children under 3 years old. And let's be honest—it can still be difficult at times for adults under certain circumstances! That's why it's important to acknowledge that children's strong emotions can also stir up strong emotions in us. Working with very young children can be emotionally exhausting! Strong emotions can “drown out” the reasoning part of the brain at any age. So, when educators allow their own strong emotions to go unchecked, they are less likely to be able to access their own rational, problem-solving thinking skills. Recognizing our own cues that we need to calm ourselves or find support is every bit as important as recognizing young children's cues when we are responding to an emotionally upsetting situation.

Managing our own emotions:

- helps us to be able to access higher-level thinking and problem-solving areas of the brain so we can respond with intention to the child's needs;
- prevents us from reacting in a harsh, punitive way or in a manner that startles or frightens children; and
- provides a model for children of how to handle strong emotions everyone feels sometimes.



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Just like children, adults' tolerance for and reaction to upsetting situations differs from person to person. It can even differ depending on the time of day, how we are feeling, and other events that have happened previously. In situations that are upsetting to everyone, it can be challenging to be sensitive to your own frustration threshold as well as to the child's, and to apply techniques to calm yourself before attending to the child, but is worth the effort to practice.

Claire Lerner, senior parenting advisor for ZERO TO THREE, provides food for thought to parents that applies equally to infant–toddler educators:

*The fact is that our children's emotional reactions trigger our own emotional reactions, which can lead to a knee-jerk need to **rescue** or **fix** whatever is causing our child distress. But it's important that we manage our own feelings and avoid this temptation, as it creates a missed opportunity to help children learn strong coping skills. Instead, see these experiences as teachable moments to help your child learn to name and manage the emotions—positive and negative—that add depth and color to our lives. Show your child that a full, rich life means experiencing both the ups and the downs. Feelings are not “good” or “bad”—they just are. You are your child's guide in sharing the joys and coping with the challenges. \**

Learning to appreciate and, when necessary, manage the full spectrum of human emotions is a life-long task. Educators have the rewarding responsibility each day to help infants and toddlers start that learning journey in the context of a warm, caring relationship.

\*Excerpted from: Lerner, C. (2016). *Managing your own emotions: The key to positive, effective parenting*. Retrieved from [www.zerotothree.org/resources/521-managing-your-own-emotions-the-key-to-positive-effective-parenting](http://www.zerotothree.org/resources/521-managing-your-own-emotions-the-key-to-positive-effective-parenting)