Chapter 1
The Importance of Emotional Regulation in Child and Adolescent Functioning and School Success

Emotion Regulation

Spending any time at all in or around a school provides ample opportunity to observe students who are having difficulty coping with the stresses of their daily lives. On a playground you might see a student with an angry expression pushing another student out of the way. Or, you might hear one yelling at his playmates about whether or not he is “in” or “out” of the game. You might spot yet another student sulking long after being reprimanded by a playground monitor, or one isolating herself from others on the edge of the playground avoiding interaction and even eye contact with any of the other children playing nearby.

Inside the school building you might see a parent or teacher trying to calm an hysterical student or a frustrated teacher trying to interact reasonably with one who has “shut down” completely and cannot hear anything that is being said to him. You might find an older student hiding in the restroom trying to calm down after having “escaped” temporarily from the teasing he was being subjected to in the cafeteria. Or you might observe a student who is frequently “scapegoated” by peers hugging the corridor walls, walking at the slowest pace possible toward her classroom. You may see a student scribble all over an almost finished paper or crumple it up because he has made an error.

You might see a student taking a test who is dealing with so much emotion that she cannot even begin to write. You may observe one who cannot focus or organize his thinking well enough to even begin to focus on the work in front of him. In a high school you may see a student turn to his locker and hit it hard with his fist after being reprimanded by a teacher or rejected by a girlfriend. You may suddenly realize how often a particular student is visiting the school nurse, especially around exam time. You may wonder why a student sits alone at lunch wearing a cap or hood to hide his face when others appear to be socializing comfortably.

None of these observations is unusual, although they may not be apparent to the casual observer or even seen regularly, depending on the awareness and expertise of staff and the general climate of a particular school. On the other
hand, you may observe students yelling, demoralized, or actually fighting in a school, or totally withdrawn, when the school’s climate is less healthy and the staff less competent. Although none of these observations in and of itself points to pathology, all of these students are having difficulty controlling or “regulating” their emotions. At the very least, difficulty regulating one’s emotions would result in unhappiness; at worst, it could result in serious emotional or behavioral problems.

Regulating our emotions involves a necessary and important set of skills that all of us must master to some degree in order to negotiate our day-to-day lives, and emotion regulation has become a “hot topic” in several disciplines. Interest, research, and knowledge around the construct of emotion regulation are expanding rapidly (Eisenberg, Champion, and Ma 2004). Researchers in a number of fields—social and personality psychology, child and normal development, cognition, neuroscience, psychopathology, education psychology, and now school psychology—now realize that the ability of individuals to regulate emotion is relevant to their specific academic areas. Emotion regulation has become an overriding theme in affective science (Rottenberg and Gross 2003) and a major and popular topic in developmental psychology (Eisenberg, Champion, et al. 2004). Cole, Martin, and Dennis (2004) consider emotion regulation to be “an exciting lens through which to study development” (p. 330).

Definitions of Emotion Regulation

Researchers and theorists have not as yet settled on an agreed upon definition of emotion regulation. In fact, there is considerable discussion and debate around it—to the extent that questions have been raised in regard to its usefulness as a scientific construct (Cole, Martin, et al. 2004). Although one area of agreement is the idea that emotion regulation involves internal processes that have to do with emotions, not everyone considers intent or overt behavior as a consequence of emotion regulation or lack thereof in their definition. There is disagreement in regard to whether or not the concept includes external regulation of a child by parents or teachers and if both voluntary and involuntary regulation can be included. Nor is there total agreement in regard to anticipatory emotion regulation as an important component of emotion regulation.

The literature provides a number of definitions. Cole, Martin, et al. (2004) wrote about emotion regulation as the changes that are associated with emotions once they are triggered by some event or situation. Bridges, Margie, and Zaff (2001) consider emotion regulation to be a group of processes that a person might use to call up a positive or negative emotion, hold onto the emotion, control it, or change it, and they differentiate between the feelings of emotion and how emotion might be displayed. Thompson (1991) was interested in both extrinsic and intrinsic actions associated with behavioral reactions as a result of experiencing emotions. Dahl (2001) looked at emotion regulation as the