

Empowering Schools  
in Self-Regulation of  
Media and Information  
Literacy processes

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# Education Brief





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## Emotional Regulation and Reading

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### What role do emotions play in how students read?

Emotions lead an individual's actions and have a profound influence on how children approach, experience and perform their learning tasks, including reading acquisition and mastering.

### What is an emotion?

Emotion indicates a subjective state that occurs in response to something we experience. Emotions normally last for a brief period of time, from seconds to minutes. They are inherently linked to and influence transversal cognitive skills such as attention, memory, and executive function. The main basic emotional states include happy, sad, fear, anger, disgust, surprise and interest. According to some authors (Oatley, Keltner, & Jenkins 2006) an emotion has the following components: a) a recognizable feeling directed toward an object (e.g., happiness about seeing a friend); b) a bodily change (e.g., increased heart rate); c) recognizable gestures (e.g., smile); and d) a readiness for action, (e.g., ready to give a hug to a friend).

### What is the role of emotional regulation in the learning process?

Emotions have an integral role in learning along the life course but are crucial in childhood and adolescence when, differently from adulthood, goals are difficult to be maintained on a rational base only. During childhood emotions can either support the learning process or undermine it by allowing a child to focus on a task and overcome a setback or by yielding to frustration and distraction respectively. Understanding how emotional regulation works could help educators promote positive emotions to enhance the learning experience.

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The most influential theoretical model of emotional regulation is the one proposed by Gross 2015. According to this model emotional regulation is a three-stage process: identification, selection, and implementation. In the identification stage, emotions are detected and are perceived as subjective experiences. The selection stage involves identification of available emotional regulation strategies. The final implementation stage involves translating a general emotional regulation strategy into specific behaviours that would be most suitable for a specific situation. Each stage contributes to emotional development, from infancy to adolescence, allowing one to manage his/her own emotions to respond to challenging learning situations. By operationalizing emotional regulation in different stages may help educators in understanding and supporting children struggling in emotional regulation.

## Emotional regulation in adolescence

From a developmental perspective, adolescents experience greater fluctuations in emotional regulation compared to children or other age groups. They are more prone to experiencing higher levels of negative mood and are also found to be more sensitive to rewarding experiences than are adults and younger children (Riediger, Wrzus, Schmiedek, Wagner, & Lindenberger, 2011). During adolescence the neurofunctional circuits of the cognitive control and of the emotional regulation change and interplay, looking for a new balance that will characterise adulthood; these neurofunctional changes may be associated to the difficulties for adolescents to self-regulate their own emotions (Siegel, 2014). Understanding how emotion regulation develops during adolescence is therefore important for prevention of difficulties emerging from emotional regulation in learning.

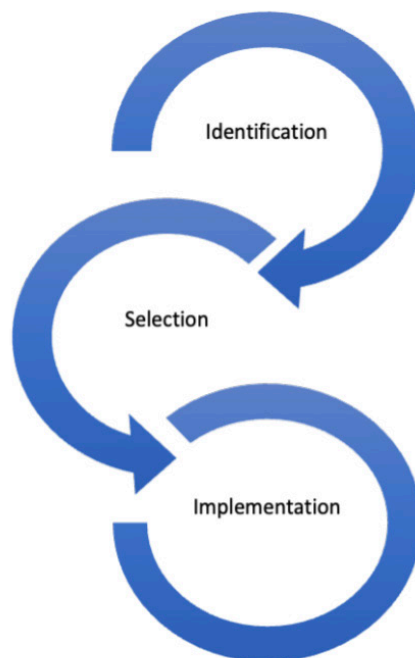
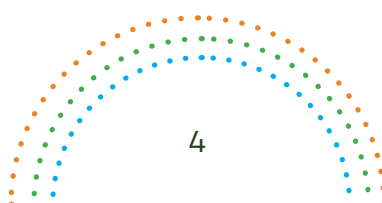


Figure 1. An adapted chart of the three stages model of Emotional Regulation by Gross 2015



## How is emotional-regulation related to reading?

Emotional regulation processes allow children to remain focused and overcome frustration and distraction during the completion of learning tasks. This is particularly important for beginning or struggling readers for whom persistence and attention are crucial at acquiring orthographic rules and automatizing their reading skills. Empirical studies have found that several skills related to reading, such as decoding, vocabulary knowledge, and text comprehension, require emotional regulation (Wigfield, Gladstone, & Turci, 2016). Furthermore, since preschool ages children's emotional regulation skills have positively predicted early alphabetization (Graziano, Reavis, Keane, & Calkins, 2007). Nevertheless, reading itself can also influence children's emotional regulation because it elicits emotional responses in the reader providing an opportunity to recognize these feelings and regulate them in real-world situations. A recent intervention study with Spanish adolescents revealed that intervention on reading habits positively affected both reading decoding and emotional intelligence (Jiménez-Pérez et al., 2023). By triggering emotions, reading can help children and adolescents to evaluate and understand the types of emotions they may experience daily in real life.

Reading in digital mode can also be influenced by children's emotional regulation processes. The interaction between the reader and the books in digital mode is different from that one in printed mode, mainly due to many options that the digital reading offers to the reader. For example, hypertext requires readers to interact with the text by choosing which links to follow. This can be confusing to beginning or poor readers who are often less confident in their reading skills and may think that by using links they can lose important information. These uncertainties can lead to anxiety and impatience which in turn may affect their reading performance itself. For example, according to the 'shallowing hypothesis' (Carr, 2010) the frequent use of media technologies leads to dramatic decline in the process of deep reading. This may trigger children's fluctuation of emotions in reading tasks, as their superficial attitude toward digital reading may not result in successful comprehension of the text read. Thus, while digital reading is immensely spreading in schools, it is important that educators monitor children's emotions during reading in digital mode and help them manage their fluctuating or negative emotions.

### Practical tips for teacher education

- When it comes to children in kindergarten, boosting emotional regulation, providing a forgiving and positive environment can represent a protective factor for the subsequent acquisition of instrumental learning skills such as reading.
- Understanding which emotional regulation phase students struggle with (i.e. identification, selection or implementation) can help educators better address students' needs and suggest more concrete strategies.
- Although emotional regulation can drive reading acquisition and automatization, sharing reading activities in the school context may promote students' awareness of their emotion.
- Educational contexts should recognise that although the bases of emotional regulation develop from early ages, the emotional dysregulation characterising adolescence can also affect basic learning skills such as reading, especially in challenging contexts such as the digital modes.

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