

# CALMING TOOLS FOR A DYSREGULATED CHILD



**Dysregulation** is a state of emotional turbulence that usually happens when a child's nervous system is struggling to process and respond to the environment. The result is a child who may appear upset, restless, or "revved up."

Dysregulation does not look the same in every child, but can sometimes involve big meltdowns, overly rough play, loud/fast speech, or a child seeming to "shut down." Children who are dysregulated will often have difficulty listening, following directions, or calming down on their own. Having a few quick and easy calming tools at the ready can help to settle a dysregulated child and re-engage the "thinking brain."

## Deep Breathing



Deep breathing is a simple but powerful tool that helps deactivate the fight-or-flight response. Taking steady, purposeful breaths can reduce stress hormones, slow a racing heart, and focus the thoughts. To help make this exercise more fun, encourage your child to pair each breath with an imaginary activity (e.g., smell a flower, fill up the belly like a balloon, hiss like a snake, blow out a candle).

## Heavy Work

"Heavy work" describes activities and movements that place active resistance on a child's muscles and joints. These resistive actions (think pushing, pulling, carrying, lifting) provide relaxing input that can help to calm and re-organize a child's nervous system. Examples: carrying books in a backpack, pulling a full wagon or laundry basket, wheelbarrow walking or walking like animals (e.g., frog jump, snake crawl)



## Visual Tools

Giving the visual system a job to do is a great way to help a child relax and refocus. Visual objects such as a sand timer hourglass or a homemade sensory bottle with colored water/glue/glitter etc. are one way to provide calming visual input, but the visual system can also be engaged without any accessories. Prop-free ideas include: I Spy games, hand shadow puppets, or even closing the eyes and describing a favorite place in detail.



## Rhythmic Movement

Movement-based activities can be calming or alerting to a child's nervous system, and not every child will respond the same way. Movements that have a consistent rhythm tend to provide more organizing sensory information and are therefore typically more soothing during periods of dysregulation. Think repetitive, controlled movements like swinging back and forth, bouncing on an exercise ball, or rocking in a rocking chair.



## Tactile Play

Touch-based activities can provide organizing input to calm the body. Examples of calming tactile tools include handheld fidgets that can be squished, kneaded, or stretched in the hands, a "mystery bag" of small toys that a child can identify by touch only, or sensory bins. Some children may avoid touching wet or messy textures, so supervised exploration of a dry sensory bin (e.g., uncooked rice) can be a good place to start.



# CALMING TOOLS FOR A DYSREGULATED CHILD



## IDEAS TO TRY

Pretend to smell a flower and then blow out a candle	Carry books in a backpack	Play "I Spy"
Rock in a rocking chair	Pull another child in a wagon	Close your eyes and describe your favorite place
Make a sensory bottle	Swing back and forth	Explore a dry bean bin
Jump like a frog	Hand shadow puppets	Wheelbarrow walking
Listen to quiet music	Chew a crunchy snack	Hiss like a snake
Push your hands against the wall	Pretend to blow up a balloon	Fill a bag with toys and find each one by touch only
Give a big hug	Squeeze a stress ball	Crawl like a caterpillar
Stretch your arms all the way up to the sky or out to the walls	Blow bubbles	Bounce on an exercise ball
Drink a smoothie through a long straw	Squish/stretch play-doh in your hands	Sort toys by color or shape