The Zones of Regulation: A Curriculum Designed to Foster Self-Regulation and Emotional Control

by Mark Katz, PhD

CAN SELF-REGULATION SKILLS be taught to children with ADHD? "Yes," says occupational therapist and social learning specialist Leah Kuypers, "they can be taught to all children who struggle to control themselves, including children with ADHD."

When it comes to regulating our levels of arousal and emotional control, says Kuypers, specific skills are required. Most children develop these skills as they grow. For children whose self-regulation skills are lagging behind, however, these skills need to be taught. Kuypers developed a curriculum designed with this in mind: teach children with lagging self-regulation skills how to effectively regulate themselves at school, at home, and in the company of their friends.

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Called *The Zones of Regulation—The Zones* for short—the curriculum categorizes states of arousal and emotional control into four easily identified color-coded zones:

- the **Red Zone**, where emotions are so intense that we feel out of control
- the **Yellow Zone**, where emotions are not as intense, at least not as yet, and we still have some control
- the **Green Zone**, a calmer place, where we feel focused, alert, in control of our emotions, and ready to learn
- the **Blue Zone**, a low state of alertness, too low to get much work done

For example, we know we're in the Blue Zone when we're not feeling well, we're tired, or maybe when we're too bored to focus.

The Zones can be explained much as we would explain traffic signs. Red means stop. Yellow is a warning to slow down and be cautious. Blue is like a rest area off the freeway, a place where we can stop, take a break, and get re-energized. Green means we're good to go.

"There are no good zones or bad zones," Kuypers explains. "All zones represent states that we're all in from time to time. But our zones need to match the situation. This is what the curriculum helps children learn to do. How to match their zone to what's expected, based on the environmental and social demands. It may be okay to be in the yellow zone on the playground, just not in the library."

Within the course of eighteen lessons, children learn ways to identify their different states of arousal and emotional control. Children who previously struggled when asked to explain how they feel now have a vocabulary for doing so. Children also learn about different tools for moving from one zone to another, including tools for staying in the Green Zone, a zone they need to be in to function well in class. There are different tools for different emotional states. Some tools help us to stay calm. Some help us to be more alert. Some help us to stay in control. Children have an opportunity to explore which tools work best in which situations. They also practice executing them in situations where they're needed, "at the points of performance." Kuypers is well versed in practices designed to help children with executive function challenges. Lessons incorporate activities with these challenges in mind.

Lessons also teach children to recognize



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personal triggers that typically send them into yellow and red zones. Then they practice ways of identifying and preparing for triggers beforehand. This way they can prevent themselves from losing control in situations where losing control has occurred in the past. In order to encourage children to take more ownership of their self-regulation skills, Kuypers also incorporates a number of cognitive behavioral strategies designed to increase positive self-talk, as well as self-monitoring and self-management skills.

Lessons focus particular attention on teaching the self-regulation skills we need to be successful in social situations, especially when it comes to making and keeping friends. Children learn how their reactions in different zones affect others, including other children at school. They also practice recognizing other people's facial expressions, and how different facial expressions relate to different zones people are in. Children become more skilled at appreciating other people's moods and emotions. For

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teaching social skills, The Zones draws upon several of Michelle Garcia Winner's strategies for teaching Social Thinking (socialthinking.com).

The curriculum is intended for anyone who works with students in grades K-12 who struggle in areas associated with self-regulation. In actuality, though, the curriculum has broader applications. Since most of us struggle from time to time in managing our emotions and controlling our behavior, many teachers are using *The Zones* for their entire class. Teachers and others using the curriculum also say the strategies help them in their own personal lives. The curriculum has also been successfully adapted to teach pre-kindergarten students.

Lessons are intended to be taught in groups, but can also be taught individually. Kuypers has written a book, *The Zones of Regulation: A Curriculum Designed to Foster Self-Regulation and Emotional Control* (Social Thinking Publishing, 2011), which includes a CD-ROM containing reproducible visuals and handouts related to lessons.

Kuypers currently conducts trainings around the United States for educators, clinicians, parents and others interested in learning more about the curriculum and self-regulation. Visit her website, zonesofregulation.com, or email Kuypers directly (leah@zonesofregulation.com) to learn more about The Zones or to find a schedule of upcoming trainings.

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