

## Notes for teachers

Engaging with plants, gardening or the natural outdoors is supportive of mental wellbeing. Serotonin and endorphin are hormones we release when we are in these environments. These are our bodies' feel-good hormones. They make us feel well. Time with plants can be restorative and regulating of mood. Even access to natural spaces is shown to reduce stress.

Plants are not dissimilar to us. They struggle to grow, thrive, overcome disease and deal with plant stresses, such as over- or under-watering. Like us, they often need the support of others. Plants are non-threatening and relatable. They can provide us with helpful metaphors for our own lives in our attempts to be resilient. Caring for plants therefore can support self-esteem.

The aim of this approach is to help children and young people to think about what they are doing and how it makes them feel. These resources are aides to support children and young people to understand and manage their emotions. The idea is that they can consider the experience of gardening as a mental health 'toolkit', and learn to choose gardening activities that best support how they feel.

- In '**How I feel about gardening**' we invite children and young people to notice how gardening makes them feel. We use the 'Zones of Regulation' designed by Leah Kuypers to help them with this (information provided below).
- In '**How can gardening help me?**' children and young people can think about what activities they personally find most supportive in regulating their feelings. It is interesting to notice that different activities might feel different for children and young people from one day to the next. Depending on how they feel children and young people often change their perspectives.

Below is some information on the 'Zones of Regulation'. This provides a rationale for this approach. It is important to create a psychologically safe space which encourages the children and young people to talk about their emotions and experiences. Your role in active listening, being non-judgemental and providing empathic response will support this. It is helpful also to remember that every child and young person is unique, and their feelings and emotional needs differ. Fostering emotional intelligence and self-regulation skills in children and young people is an ongoing process, and it will take commitment and patience to allow for progress.

### Zones of Regulation

**Self-regulation** is the ability to understand and manage our own behaviour and reactions. Regulation requires first of all an awareness of feelings and secondly, the capacity to think about how to express these feelings. When feelings are big then it helps to know how to calm ourselves so that we can think more clearly. The Zones of Regulation categorises emotional states into four colour-coded zones, each representing a different level of emotional intensity and self-regulation.

- **Blue Zone:** This zone represents a low state. In the Blue Zone a child or young person might feel sad, tired or sick. They need support to recapture their energy and reconnect to feeling motivated.
- **Green Zone:** The Green Zone signifies an optimal state. In this zone a child or young person feels focused, calm, and ready to learn. They feel happy, content or relaxed.
- **Yellow Zone:** The Yellow Zone represents a heightened state. A child or young person might feel frustrated, anxious or excited. They need strategies to help them stay in control and make appropriate choices.
- **Red Zone:** This zone signifies an extremely heightened state. Children and young people in the Red Zone are overwhelmed by intense emotions such as anger, fear or panic. They require immediate support to calm down and regain self-control.

**Dysregulation** is the inability to control or regulate one's emotional responses, which leads to mood swings and/or emotional outbursts. This can result in the child or young person acting out or demonstrating inappropriate behaviour. This can happen when someone cannot recognise their feelings and they are overwhelmed. Dysregulation can occur for anyone when we feel overwhelmed. All of us have moments when we are unable to self-regulate: for example when our buttons are pushed or we are triggered. A person with a history of neglect or abuse, which has interrupted normal development, will need extra support to develop the capacity to self-regulate.

**Calming strategies** can be supportive and should never be dismissive of underlying feelings. All feelings are valid. There are no 'good' feelings or 'bad' feelings. Feelings are there to help us know what is going on and to understand what we need to do.

Discuss with children what being calm feels like and looks like.

- Calm makes our muscles relax
- Our minds are clear
- We can concentrate
- We feel positive
- We may feel creative
- We notice what is around us
- We feel free

## Supporting pupils with growing and gardening activities

Some children and young people will say that they feel calmer with growing and gardening activities but others might feel differently. They may feel like singing, dancing or running. Some children or young people may find they feel like crying. Giving space and permission allows children and young people to experience many different feelings. Some children may find it very difficult to know what they feel or how to express their feelings. It is important to stress that this is ok. All of us can find it difficult at times to understand or express our feelings.

Wellbeing is supported by being seen, heard and acknowledged. It is important to empathise and not tell a child to feel differently. It also helps to know who in school can provide any further support that might be needed for a child or young person.