



Managing Emotional Mayhem

By: Dr. Becky A. Bailey

A
must-read for anyone
helping children
manage big
feelings.

Curriculum Overview

Managing Emotional Mayhem: The Five Steps for Self-Regulation by Dr. Becky A. Bailey is a clear and practical guide for parents, teachers, and caregivers. It helps adults support children in handling strong emotions and learning self-control. The book is based on the Conscious Discipline® approach and introduces five steps: I Am, I Calm, I Feel, I Choose, and I Solve. These steps guide children through recognizing their emotions, calming down, naming their feelings, making smart choices, and solving problems. Dr. Bailey explains that children learn self-regulation best when adults stay calm and connected. By modeling this behavior, adults teach children how to manage their own emotions. The book uses

simple language, real-life examples, and tools like “Feeling Buddies” to make the ideas easy to apply at home or in the classroom. It combines research from brain science and child development with practical strategies, giving adults a helpful way to build emotional skills in children.

Concepts Taught: The Five Steps of Self-Regulation

Step 1: I Am – Recognizing Inner States

This step focuses on recognizing your internal state. For both adults and children, it means identifying when you’re feeling upset, angry, scared, or overwhelmed. It’s the awareness that “something is going on inside me.”

For instance, a child might clench their fists or shout—signs they are in emotional distress. Recognizing these physical cues helps create awareness of emotional states.

- Example: “I notice my heart is racing; I might be feeling upset.”

Step 2: I Calm – Regulating the Nervous System

In this step, the goal is to regulate the nervous system by using calming strategies. For children, this often means breathing deeply, focusing on calming visuals, or having a trusted adult help them co-regulate. Adults are encouraged to model calmness themselves.

For instance, a child might engage in deep belly breathing or count to 10 to calm down. These techniques help bring the body and brain back to a balanced state.

- Example: “I am safe. Keep breathing. I can handle this.”

Step 3: I Feel – Naming the Emotion

Once calm enough, the child (or adult) names the specific emotion they’re experiencing. Accurately identifying emotions is crucial for resolving them. This helps children recognize and label their feelings, which is an essential part of emotional regulation.

- Example: “I feel angry.” “I feel frustrated.” “I feel sad.” A child might say, “I feel angry because I didn’t get my way.”

Visual tools like the “Feeling Faces” chart or “Feeling Buddies” dolls can help younger children learn emotional vocabulary and identify their feelings.

Step 4: I Choose – Befriending Feelings Through Acceptance

This step teaches children to embrace their feelings rather than ignore them or push them away. When we allow feelings to come in, we also create the space for them to move on. Instead of resisting emotions or trying to control what's happening, children learn to adapt to what life offers. Accepting our feelings gives us the opportunity to choose to see things in a new way. This step is about accepting and reframing by welcoming emotions and then choosing how to respond. It also introduces the idea of using choices to select a calming technique, such as breathing or finding comfort.

Example: : "When I feel sad, I can choose to be sad with a friend or snuggle up with my favorite blanket."

Step 5: I Solve – Solving Problems

"I Solve" is about empowering children to become active participants in problem-solving, rather than reacting with blame, avoidance, or aggression. It teaches that mistakes are not failures, they're learning opportunities. Children can be guided to pause and reflect instead of reacting impulsively. Solving a problem means looking at what happened, how it impacted others, and what can be done to make it better. This practice encourages accountability without shame, empathy and perspective-taking, and restorative action thus repairing relationships and making amends. "I Solve" shifts the focus from external control (punishment or reward) to internal regulation and ownership.

- **Example:** "When two children are fighting over a toy, an adult might say, "You both want the blue car. What should we do? Does anyone have a solution?"

A Helpful Visual Tool: Feeling Buddies

Dr. Bailey's Feeling Buddies are designed to help children identify and manage their emotions. These tools include plush figures representing different feelings, such as:

- **Angry Buddy:** Red with a frown
- **Sad Buddy:** Blue with teardrops
- **Happy Buddy:** Yellow with a smile
- **Calm Buddy:** Green with a relaxed expression

These buddies can be used to facilitate discussions about emotions and to practice the Five Steps in a tangible, child-friendly way.

spotlight