



Handling Emotions in the Workplace

As an early years educator, being able to handle your emotions in your demanding role is just as crucial as your curriculum knowledge. Whether you're soothing a teary toddler, juggling parent concerns, or navigating team dynamics, your ability to recognise and manage your own emotions – and support others to do the same – can have a huge impact on your well-being, the children in your care, and the overall atmosphere of your setting.

This guide is here to help you understand why emotions often run high in early years environments, how to manage your own feelings constructively, and how to support colleagues with theirs. You'll find practical advice, tools to boost your emotional strength, and tips on staying calm, assertive, and professional – even when the pressure is on.

Why Emotions Run High in Early Years Settings

Working in childcare is more than just a job – it's personal. You form deep bonds with children, navigate strong parent relationships, and often wear multiple hats throughout the day. From the moment the doors open, you're managing noise, schedules, tears, accidents, snack time, and development milestones – all under the weight of safeguarding, paperwork, inspections, and often short staffing. It's no wonder emotions can bubble to the surface.

Here are just a few reasons emotions might feel intense in our particular line of work:

- **Emotional labour:** You're constantly regulating your emotions to support children. That's tiring
- **Constant demands:** The fast pace and unpredictability of children's needs leave little room to pause
- **Conflicting expectations:** Balancing parent concerns, team dynamics, and leadership pressures can sometimes feel like you're walking a tightrope
- **Lack of downtime:** Unlike desk jobs, there are rarely quiet moments to collect your thoughts during the day



But the good news? With the right strategies and mindset, you can learn to manage these emotional highs and lows in a healthy, productive way. Let's explore this, step-by-step:

Step 1: Know Your Triggers

The first step in managing emotions is recognising what triggers them. Everyone's 'emotional landscape' is different – what frustrates or overwhelms one person may have a lesser effect (or no effect at all) on another.

Take a moment to reflect:

- Are you more sensitive to raised voices, time pressure, or feeling underappreciated?
- Do you find yourself stressed by unexpected changes in routine or communication breakdowns?

Awareness is empowering. When you understand your triggers, you can start preparing for how you'll respond, rather than reacting impulsively in the heat of the moment.

Step 2: Take a Time Out

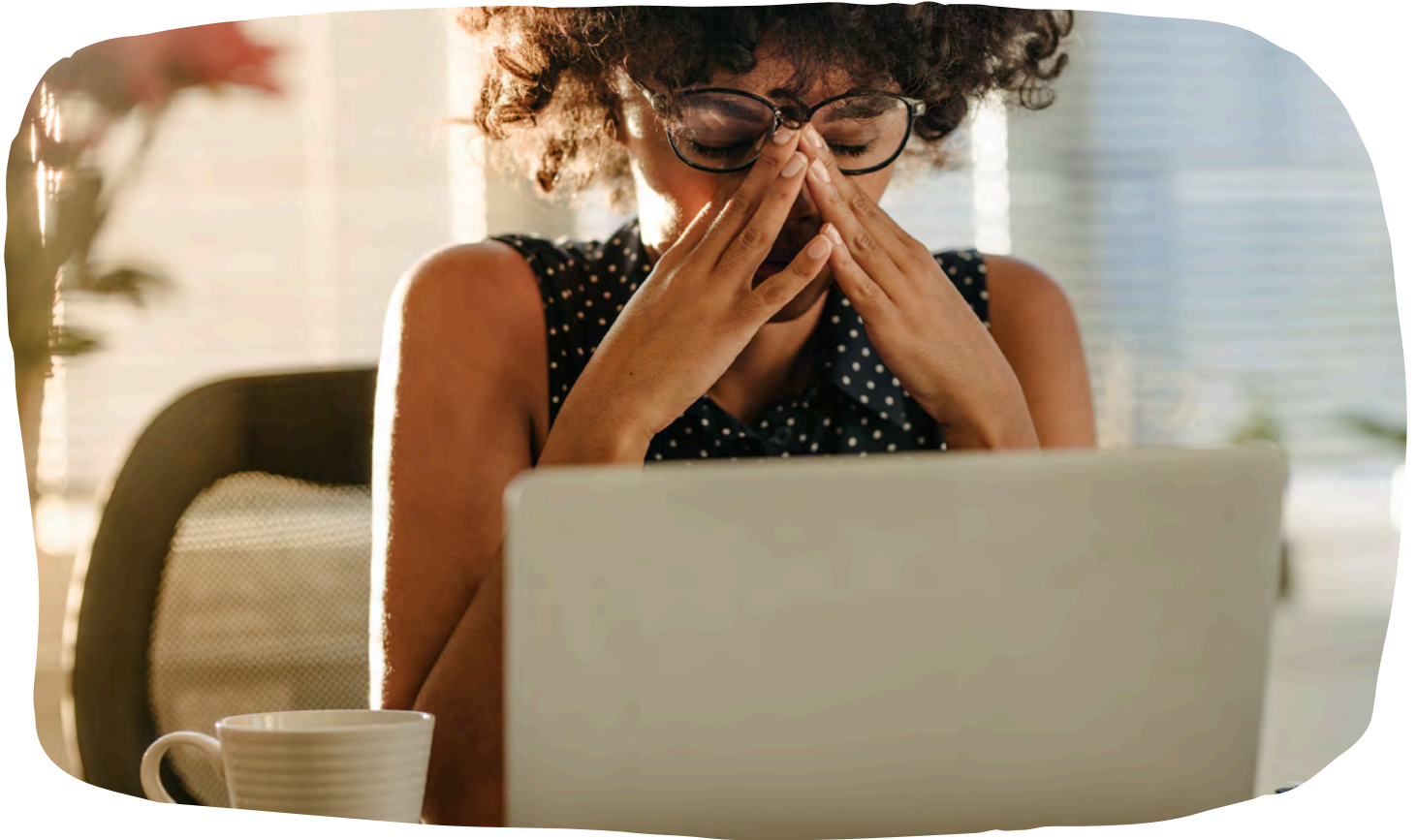
Let's be honest – a full-time role in early years can mean spending 40+ hours a week with the same team. That's enough to test even the calmest colleague. Emotions like frustration, disappointment, or overwhelm are completely natural. The important part is how you manage them.

If someone or something has upset you, pause before responding. That angry email or snappy comment might offer temporary relief, but it usually leads to regret.

Instead, try this:

- **Step away:** Even 15 minutes outside or in the staffroom (ratios allowing) can help you calm down and put some perspective on the situation
- **Reflect:** Is the issue with a person, the team, or the job itself? Understanding the root helps guide your response
- **Plan a resolution:** Once you're calmer, raise the issue in a private, constructive setting like a team meeting or supervision session
- **Stay solution-focused:** Rather than venting or blaming, look for ways forward. What can change? What needs support?

Managing emotions professionally doesn't mean bottling them up – it means knowing when and how to express them in a way that moves things forward.



Step 3: Dealing with Disappointment

In early years settings, promotions, praise, and opportunities don't always come your way. It can sting when someone else is recognised or chosen over you, or when your hard work goes unnoticed.

Here's how to turn disappointment into growth:

- **Ask for feedback:** Be proactive. What could you have done differently? What strengths did the other person demonstrate? The answers may surprise (and motivate) you!
- **Set goals:** Work with your manager to build a personal development plan. Whether it's improving communication, gaining qualifications, or taking on new responsibilities, focus on progression
- **Use disappointment as fuel:** Rather than letting setbacks demotivate you, let them drive your ambition. Many successful leaders have stories of initial rejection or failure

Remember, not everything is personal. Your ability to bounce back with maturity and curiosity will be noticed.

Step 4: Responding, Not Reacting

Have you ever left a meeting and kicked yourself for not speaking up? Or let something slide because you didn't want to "rock the boat"? Building emotional maturity in the workplace isn't just about managing anger or stress – it's also about learning to be more assertive. But what do we mean by this?

Assertiveness means stating your needs, setting boundaries, and responding to situations in a constructive and respectful way. It's not aggression – it's confidence paired with kindness.

Here are five practical ways to be more assertive:

Type	How to be assertive	Example
Responsive	Show interest in the other person's feelings	<i>"How do you feel about this approach?"</i>
Empathetic	Acknowledge their view, but share your own	<i>"I see your point, but let's explore these other ideas too."</i>
Discrepancy	Highlight misalignment with agreed actions	<i>"We agreed to complete this by Friday – where are we now?"</i>
Negative Feelings	Explain how something made you feel	<i>"Our recent discussion has left me feeling unheard. Can we discuss this?"</i>
Consequences	Outline potential impact	<i>"If we don't resolve this now, we may risk a parent complaint."</i>

The best outcomes often come from assertive communication. It's a skill – and like any skill, it gets better with practice.

Step 5: Building Assertiveness Over Time

If you've always found it difficult to speak up or share your honest opinion, don't worry – confidence can be developed. Here's how to start:

1

Practise, practise, practise

Whether it's in staff meetings or one-to-ones, preparation is your friend. Rehearse what you want to say out loud. Get used to the sound of your voice. Ask a trusted friend to roleplay situations with you.

2

Watch and learn

Observe colleagues or leaders you admire. How do they stand? How do they phrase things? Watch TED Talks or training videos for inspiration and body language tips.

3

Take the leap

If you're waiting to feel completely ready before you speak up, you may be waiting forever. Confidence often comes after you act, not before. Jump in when the moment comes.

4

Reflect and improve

After any challenging interaction, take a moment to reflect. What went well? What could you tweak next time? Learning from experience is the fastest way to grow.



Step 6: Supporting Your Team

Handling your own emotions is one thing – but what happens when it's a colleague who's struggling?

As an early years professional, you are likely part of a close-knit team. Emotional moments – from tears in the staffroom to workplace tensions – are bound to occur. Supporting your colleagues with compassion and professionalism creates a better environment for everyone.

What you can do:

- **Be approachable:** Make it clear that your door (or an ear) is open. A simple “Are you okay today?” can go a long way
- **Don't try to fix everything:** Sometimes people just want to feel heard. You don't need to offer solutions – just space to talk
- **Respect confidentiality:** If a colleague shares something personal, keep it private unless it affects a safeguarding issue or serious workplace conduct
- **Signpost to support:** Remind your team of any well-being resources, HR policies, or EAPs (Employee Assistance Programmes) they can access



Step 7: Keeping Perspective

One of the best ways to handle emotions in an early years setting is to remember why you do what you do.

Every time you help a child take a new step, calm an anxious parent, or make your colleagues laugh after a long day, you're making a real difference. That doesn't mean every day will feel easy – but it helps to keep your purpose front and centre.

Try to:

- **Celebrate small wins:** Did a quiet child speak up today? Did your team pull together through a tough inspection? Take time to acknowledge the good, regardless of whether you're a manager or not

- **Practise gratitude:** At the end of each day, note three things that went well. It rewires your brain to focus on positives, not just problems
- **Know when to seek help:** If your emotions are becoming overwhelming or you're feeling burnt out, speak to your manager or GP. You can't pour from an empty cup

Work With Your Emotions, Not Against Them

In the world of early years, managing your emotions isn't just a "nice to have" – it's a daily necessity. By understanding your own feelings, responding with assertiveness and empathy, and supporting your colleagues to do the same, you help create a culture where everyone – staff, children, and parents – can thrive.

Remember:

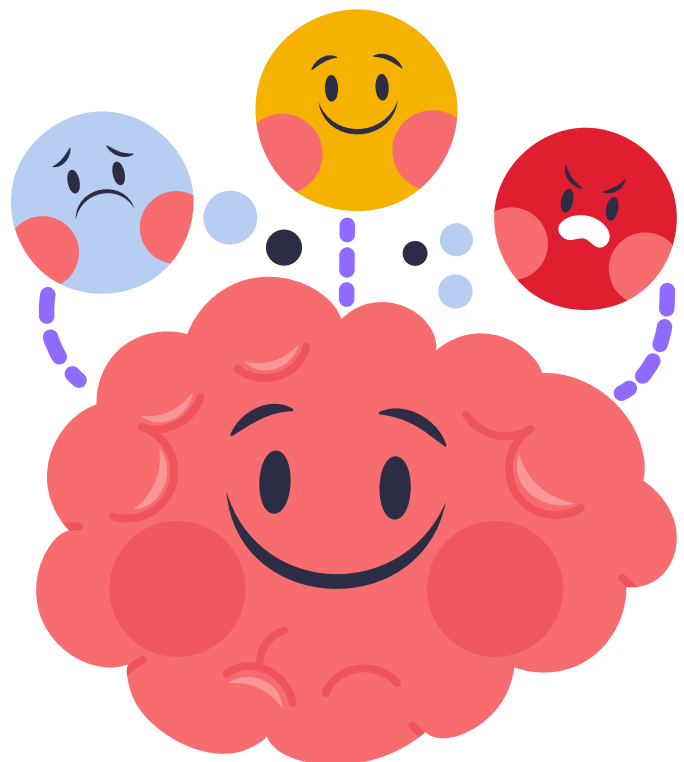
Don't take negative feedback personally. And try to understand your emotions and work with them, not against them. It'll make you a better employee – and probably a happier one too. Handling emotions in the workplace is not about being emotionless. It's about being emotionally smart.

Final Thought

None of this is about suppressing how you feel. It's about learning how to channel those emotions constructively so you can be your best self – for your colleagues, your setting and most importantly, the children in your care.

When you invest in your own emotional development, you also role model the kind of emotional awareness and resilience that young children will carry with them throughout their lives.

So next time you feel overwhelmed, take a breath. Step back. Reflect. And remember, managing your emotions is not a sign of weakness – it's a sign of strength.



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