

Calm Is Not Quiet:

A Guide for Supporting Children's Regulation at Home and School

Why This Matters:

Many adults have learned to associate calm with quiet, still bodies, and immediate compliance. While these expectations may make adult spaces feel more manageable, they do not reflect how young children regulate emotions. For children, regulation is a learning process—not a switch that can be turned on with reminders or consequences. When adults expect quiet before offering support, children often feel misunderstood, which can intensify emotional responses rather than reduce them.

Understanding that calm can look active, verbal, and relational helps adults respond more effectively. Children who move, talk through feelings, repeat questions, or seek closeness are often using appropriate strategies to manage big emotions. When adults recognize and support these behaviors, children are more likely to settle and engage over time.



What Calm Might Look Like

Calm in young children may include:

- Talking through what happened
- Repeating words, phrases, or questions
- Moving their body (rocking, pacing, wiggling)
- Staying close to a trusted adult
- Expressing emotions through voice or facial expressions

These behaviors are signs that a child is actively working toward regulation.

Common Adult Expectations

Adults may expect calm to look like:

- Silence
- Sitting still
- Immediate listening
- Eye contact
- Emotional control without support

These expectations are often rooted in adult comfort rather than child development.

What Adults Can Do Instead

Before correcting or redirecting behavior, adults can focus on connection and understanding. Helpful responses include:

- Naming what you see: "Your body looks like it needs to move right now."
- Offering reassurance: "You're upset, and I'm here with you."
- Staying close: Sitting beside the child rather than sending them away
- Using fewer words and a calm tone

Boundaries still matter, but regulation/connection comes before redirection.

Reflection

When a child is loud, emotional, or wiggly, what am I assuming- and what else might be true?

