

THE RISE OF EMOTIONAL DYSREGULATION AMONG STUDENTS IN ISRAEL: PRESENTING THE PROBLEM AND THE EXISTING KNOWLEDGE GAP

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Abstract: *Israel's education system faces a marked rise in emotional dysregulation among students, significantly exacerbated by the psychosocial consequences of two defining crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, including the closure of educational institutions, disruption of routine, and social isolation, and the events of October 7, 2023, and the ongoing war, which gave rise to anxiety, trauma, and sustained security uncertainty. Data from the National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (RAMA, 2024) indicate that only 58% of students feel their teachers listen to and care for them; 36% report difficulty controlling themselves when angry. Emotional regulation, the ability to manage, understand, and adaptively control emotions, is a central factor in academic, social, and psychological success. Nevertheless, a significant research gap exists in the Israeli context: no systematic study has examined the psychological mechanisms influencing emotional regulation development among elementary school students, particularly the role of relationships with significant adult figures, against the backdrop of recent crises. This article presents the scope of the problem, reviews the relevant literature, and identifies the existing knowledge gap.*

Keywords: *emotional regulation, Israeli education system, COVID-19, war, elementary school, mental health, school violence, Eilat, emotional development*

Introduction

One of the most pressing challenges facing Israel's education system in recent years is a troubling rise in emotional dysregulation among students. The phenomenon manifests in verbal and physical violence, social difficulties, and a tangible impairment of learning processes. This challenge is not new; however, two defining events have intensified it considerably: the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) and the events of October 7, 2023, and the ongoing war.

The ability to regulate emotions: to manage, understand, and adaptively control one's feelings, is, according to the research literature, one of the central factors associated with academic, social, and psychological success (Gross, 2015). This capacity does not develop in

isolation; it is profoundly shaped by the social environment and the relationships a child maintains with significant figures in their life.

This article presents the problem systematically: it outlines the scope of emotional dysregulation difficulties among students in Israel and worldwide, examines the factors that have intensified it in recent years, reviews the concept of emotional regulation and its importance, and identifies the significant gap in Israeli research knowledge.

1. The Scope of the Problem: A Global and Israeli Perspective

1.1 The Global Reality

Empirical evidence from around the world reveals a concerning picture of a marked rise in emotional dysregulation among students, particularly since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Harel-Fisch et al., 2023; Ludwig-Walz et al., 2023; Prothero, 2023). In the United States, according to the National Survey of Children's Health, more than 5.3 million adolescents, 20.3% of the population, are currently diagnosed with mental health conditions including anxiety, depression, or behavioral problems, representing a 35% increase between 2016 and 2023 (Collette Breuner & Bell, 2023). In Europe, according to the latest UNICEF data (2024), over 11 million children and adolescents, approximately 13%, suffer from a mental disorder, and suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents aged 15–19.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a turning point in children's mental health. According to the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (2022), 87% of public schools reported that the pandemic had negatively affected students' behavioral and social-emotional development. Research conducted during the pandemic found that the absence of opportunities for children to practice social and emotional skills led to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and a failure to develop essential competencies such as conflict resolution and problem-solving (Watts & Pattnaik, 2023).

This trend continued and intensified following the return to in-person learning. In a survey published by EdWeek in 2024, 72% of educators reported that students behave more inappropriately today than before the COVID-19 pandemic (EdWeek Research Center, 2024). According to data from the U.S. National Center for Education Statistics (2024), 26% of public-school principals reported that students' lack of focus had a severe and negative impact on learning, and 20% of schools reported threats of physical assault between students at least once a week.

1.2 The Israeli Reality: COVID-19 and War

Israel experienced two defining crises that placed a heavy burden on the emotional regulation of children and adolescents. The first was the COVID-19 pandemic: in a climate survey published by the Ministry of Education in 2022, 40% of respondents reported that the disruption of routine during the pandemic had negatively affected them emotionally, and approximately one-third noted a social negative impact (RAMA, 2022). This trend is corroborated by national health data: a study conducted at Bar-Ilan University in collaboration with the Ministries of Education and Health found a 10% increase in daily psychosomatic symptoms among Israeli adolescents, rising from 20% in 2019 to 30% in 2022. These adolescents also reported feeling disconnected from school and a diminished sense of belonging — reflecting the difficulty of readjusting to in-person learning after prolonged social isolation (Harel-Fisch et al., 2023).

Beyond the quantitative scope of the problem, research shed light on the specific emotional mechanisms affected. Álvarez et al. (2020) found that during the pandemic, there was an increase in emotional regulation difficulties among children and adolescents, with boys reporting greater difficulty than girls. Many children struggled to identify, understand, or accept their emotions, and an increase was observed in both internalizing symptoms (depression and anxiety) and externalizing symptoms (aggression and social difficulties).

The second crisis, which is still ongoing, began with the events of October 7, 2023, in Israel, and the war that has continued since. In a representative survey conducted in December 2023, approximately 84% of parents of children aged 2–12 reported signs of psychological distress; 64% reported that their child was frightened, and 62% reported anxiety. Distress rates reached 90% among children living in areas with frequent air raid sirens (The National Council for the Child, 2023). A report published in September 2024 indicated a 37% increase in depressive symptoms and a 54% increase in anxiety symptoms among children and adolescents (Knowledge and Information Center, 2024).

Katsoty et al. (2024) developed a prediction model estimating that approximately 5.3% of Israel's population, around 520,000 people, are expected to develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following the terrorist events and the ongoing war. These findings are reinforced by a study examining children in Sderot, a town in southern Israel that was subjected to ongoing rocket fire from Gaza, found that nearly half were diagnosed with PTSD and emotional-behavioral problems (Pat-Horenczyk et al., 2016).

1.3 RAMA Data: The Current State of Affairs

The National Authority for Measurement and Evaluation in Education (RAMA) published in 2024 the results of the climate survey for the 2022–2023 academic year, revealing concerning trends: 35% of students reported experiencing verbal violence, a 3% increase from the previous year; over 50% reported inappropriate behavior toward teachers; 36% stated they are unable to control themselves when angry; 9% of teaching staff reported violence from students; and parents reported a 4% increase in violent incidents their children experienced. Particularly notable is the finding that only 58% of students feel their teachers listen to them and show care (RAMA, 2024).

It should be noted that this survey was conducted in 2023, following the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, and cannot reflect the consequences of the ongoing war. Given the existing data and the continuation of the state of emergency, it can be reasonably assumed that future measurements will indicate further deterioration across all indicators presented above.

1.4 The Impact on the Educational Community

The growing need for emotional support consistently outpaces the available institutional response, affecting not only students but the entire educational community. In the United States, more than 70% of teachers report an increase in disruptive classroom behavior, yet only about one-third are effectively trained to manage challenging behaviors (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2020). This situation contributes to a growing burnout phenomenon: 86% of U.S. school districts struggled to fill open positions for the 2023–24 academic year, with more than 400,000 teaching positions unfilled or filled by teachers who are not fully certified (Learning Policy Institute, 2024).

The situation in Israel is no different. According to RAMA data (2023), only 65% of teachers report high job satisfaction, 21% report work-related fatigue, and 9% have experienced violence from their students. A workforce audit conducted by the Ministry of Education in June 2024 revealed a shortage of more than 10,000 teachers, and only 69% of new teachers remain in the system through their third year (RAMA, 2023). This shortage creates a negative cycle, when teachers are burned out and under pressure, their ability to provide students with the emotional support they need diminishes, which in turn exacerbates emotional dysregulation difficulties in the classroom.

These findings underscore that the challenge is not confined to students alone. It is systemic, teachers too need tools, training, and support in order to serve as regulating figures

for their students. This gap between need and actual teacher preparation constitutes an essential part of the knowledge gap this article identifies.

2. Emotional Regulation: Concept, Development, and Implications

2.1 Definition and Components

Building on this definition, the research literature identifies several core components of emotional regulation: the identification of emotions, their comprehension and acceptance, and the ability to adjust emotional responses to situational demands (Gross, 2015). In recent decades, this field has become a central focus in psychological and educational research, both because of its effects on multiple life domains and because of its recognition as a key transdiagnostic factor in the development of psychopathology (Thompson, 2019).

Gross (2015) proposes a process model of emotional regulation that organizes strategies into five principal families. The first is situation selection, avoiding engaging in situations that evoke negative emotion, or seeking out situations that elicit positive emotion. The second is situation modification, altering the physical or social features of a situation in order to change its emotional impact. The third is attentional deployment, shifting the focus of attention within a given situation to reduce or amplify emotional responses. The fourth, and most extensively researched, is cognitive change, altering the interpretation of a situation in order to change its emotional meaning. The fifth is response modulation, modifying emotional expressions after they have been activated, such as suppressing or amplifying an emotional response. This sequential structure carries direct implications for educational settings: because the five families operate at different points along the timeline of an emotional response, teachers and students have multiple potential points of intervention. A student who cannot yet reappraise a frustrating situation cognitively may nonetheless benefit from earlier strategies, such as attentional deployment or situation modification, making the model particularly valuable for designing age-appropriate support in the classroom.

Thompson (2019) defines emotional regulation as a set of external and internal processes responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and modifying emotional reactions, particularly in terms of their intensity and timing, in order to accomplish personal goals. This definition emphasizes the intentional and flexible dimension of the skill: not merely suppressing emotions, but navigating among them in a context- and goal-sensitive manner.

2.2 Positive Consequences of Well-Developed Emotional Regulation

The research literature demonstrates a consistent association between high emotional regulation skills and positive psychological, social, and academic adjustment (Eisenberg et al., 2010; Wong et al., 2023; Edossa et al., 2018). Children with well-developed emotional regulation and emotional intelligence skills display greater ability to cope with academic challenges, participate more actively in class, and express higher levels of motivation and engagement (Kwon et al., 2017; MacCann et al., 2020; Benita et al., 2017).

Longitudinal research indicates that emotional regulation skills in childhood predict better social adjustment and psychological well-being later in life (Durlak et al., 2011). Sharabi and Roth (2025) recently found that emotional regulation styles are associated with the tendency to learn from academic failures, a finding with practical educational implications. These data reinforce the importance of developing emotional regulation skills from an early age.

2.3 Negative Consequences of Emotional Regulation Difficulties

Conversely, difficulties in emotional regulation have been found to be associated with a range of adjustment problems. Aldao et al. (2010) conducted a meta-analysis that found consistent associations between maladaptive regulation strategies and psychopathology, including depression, anxiety, eating disorders, and substance use disorders. Compas et al. (2018) demonstrated in a comprehensive review that emotional regulation difficulties in childhood predict psychopathology later in life.

Vogel et al. (2021) found in a longitudinal study that trajectories of emotional dysregulation in childhood predict poorer general functioning in adolescence. Lantrip et al. (2021) demonstrated that deficits in executive functions combined with emotional regulation difficulties predict emotional-behavioral problems in adolescents — a finding with direct implications for how teachers identify and address struggling students in the classroom.

2.4 Emotional Regulation as a Developable Skill

Emotional regulation is not a fixed trait, it can be developed and strengthened across developmental stages. Accumulating evidence shows that structured educational interventions can improve these skills at any school age. Thümmeler et al. (2022) emphasized the strengthening of emotional regulation as a key task in early childhood education, highlighting the central role of the teacher as a sensitive and containing figure who reflects children's emotions, promotes their self-awareness, and supports their ability to identify emotions in

others. Klein et al. (2022) found that emotional regulation difficulties in adolescence predict future psychopathology, suggesting that intervening earlier, during childhood, may serve as a protective factor against such outcomes.

Strong evidence for developmental potential comes from the field of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs. Durlak et al. (2011) analyzed 213 studies and found that participation in SEL programs led to an average improvement of 11% in academic achievement, alongside improvements in social skills and reductions in behavioral problems. Cipriano et al. (2023), in a meta-analysis of 424 studies from 53 countries, confirmed that universal SEL programs improve social-emotional skills, reduce violent behavior, and improve school climate.

In Israel, a review conducted on behalf of the Israel Academy of Sciences (Ran et al., 2018) found that the majority of intervention programs implemented in the country lead to improvements in the development of social and emotional skills and reduce risk behaviors. Specific studies, such as evaluations of the "Life Skills" program (Benbenishty & Friedman, 2020) and the "I Can Succeed" program (Kopelman-Rubin et al., 2021), demonstrated improvements in self-control, reductions in internalizing and externalizing symptoms, and improvements in native language achievement. These findings prove that investment in developing emotional regulation is feasible and yields results. To the best of the author's knowledge, no systematic Israeli study has yet been found that examines in depth the psychological mechanisms underlying emotional regulation development among elementary school students against the backdrop of recent crises.

Emotional regulation skills are shaped primarily through the social environment, research emphasizes the central role of significant relationships, parent-child relationships, classroom climate, and teacher-student relationships, in the development of these skills (Shorer & Leibovich, 2020; Silkenbeumer et al., 2016; Crespo et al., 2017; Aksoy & Gresham, 2024). It follows that significant adult figures in the child's environment, and particularly the teacher, play a central role in the development of emotional regulation skills, a topic that will be addressed in a subsequent article focusing on teacher-student attachment theory.

3. The Systemic Response and Its Limitations

Israel's Ministry of Education recognizes the need to address the phenomenon and disseminates Director General directives on the subject. A 2023 directive emphasized the need

for preventive measures to combat violence and stated that "promoting an optimal climate in educational institutions enables physical protection, mental health, moral development, academic functioning, and the acquisition of meaningful life skills and values" (Ministry of Education Director General Directives Database, 2023). The Ministry also emphasizes the teacher's role as a figure to whom students can turn for help, protection, or calming, an implicit acknowledgment of the importance of the significant adult figure within the school environment.

Despite these Director General directives, in-service training programs, and the numerous additional measures aimed at promoting an optimal climate, the challenges posed by emotional dysregulation have not diminished. A closer look at one of the most significant educational reforms of recent years, the 'Meaningful Learning' reform implemented in 2014, reveals why. The reform aimed to transform teaching, learning, and assessment methods in order to create a richer learning experience for students. However, analysis of its implementation processes reveals that it focused primarily on technical-organizational aspects, such as writing materials, planning training programs, and recruiting personnel, while failing to address the emotional dimension of classroom life or equip teachers with practical tools for supporting students' emotional regulation. As evidence of this gap, 45% of elementary school and middle school principals reported that teachers lack the knowledge and tools to implement meaningful instruction (RAMA, 2024). This finding attests to a structural gap between policy intentions and actual teacher preparedness, a gap that directly affects teachers' ability to support students' emotional regulation in the classroom.

4. The Knowledge Gap: A Question That Remains Unanswered

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of emotional regulation, three significant research gaps remain open in the Israeli context. First, the most recent published climate survey was conducted in 2023, following the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, but before it was possible to measure the long-term consequences of the ongoing war. A new survey was administered in early 2026, yet its findings have not been published at the time of writing. Future findings are expected to reflect an even more difficult reality.

Second, although numerous educational programs exist with the goal of promoting emotional regulation, to the best of the author's knowledge no systematic Israeli study has yet been found that examines in depth the psychological mechanisms influencing emotional

regulation development among elementary school students — and in particular the role of relationships with significant adult figures in this process.

Third, to the best of the author's knowledge, no Israeli research has yet been found that examines the phenomenon against the backdrop of the unique context that has emerged following COVID-19 and the ongoing war, a context that may alter the psychological dynamics operating within schools.

These three gaps converge into a single central question that, to the best of the author's knowledge, has yet to be answered: what are the psychological mechanisms mediating the relationship between connections with significant adult figures and the development of emotional regulation among elementary school students in Israel, against the backdrop of recent crises? These gaps underscore the urgent need for systematic, contextually appropriate Israeli research that considers the country's unique security and social reality.

5. Practical Recommendations for Elementary School Teachers

The findings presented in this article, together with the broader research literature, indicate that emotional regulation as a developable skill requires deliberate and consistent action on the part of the teacher within the classroom environment (Thümmeler et al., 2022). Several practical recommendations for elementary school teachers may be derived from these findings.

First, teachers are encouraged to incorporate brief moments of emotional awareness into the daily classroom routine, such as identifying and naming emotions, regulated breathing exercises, and open discussion of emotional difficulties. Consistent practice of this kind supports the development of early regulation strategies, such as attentional deployment and cognitive change, along the timeline of an emotional response (Gross, 2015).

Second, given RAMA data (2024) indicating that approximately 42% of students do not feel that their teachers listen to them and show care, it is important that teachers allocate time and space for active listening and for the expression of personal care toward their students. This relationship, between a student and a teacher as a significant adult figure, itself constitutes a supportive factor in the development of emotional regulation (Aksoy & Gresham, 2024).

Third, in light of the evidence regarding the effectiveness of Social-Emotional Learning programs, teachers are encouraged to integrate SEL principles into their instruction in a

systematic manner, not as a standalone program, but as an integral part of everyday teaching. This approach has been shown to improve social-emotional skills and reduce violent behavior (Cipriano et al., 2023; Durlak et al., 2011).

Finally, given Israel's ongoing security reality and the high burnout rates documented among teachers (RAMA, 2023), it is recommended that teachers working in high-stress areas seek professional support resources within the school framework, both for their students and for themselves. A teacher experiencing emotional exhaustion will find it difficult to provide students with the emotional presence they require for regulation support (Thümmeler et al., 2022). The central role of the teacher as a significant figure in students' emotional regulation development will be examined in depth in a subsequent article focusing on teacher-student attachment theory.

Conclusion

This article has identified a complex, multidimensional problem: a marked rise in emotional regulation difficulties among students in Israel, intensified by two defining crises, the COVID-19 pandemic and the events of October 7, 2023, and the ongoing war. The empirical data indicate that Israel's education system is confronting a difficult reality that is not receiving an adequate response from current policy.

The research literature consistently shows that emotional regulation is a central, and developable, skill that affects academic, social, and psychological success. Gross's (2015) process model provides a theoretical framework for understanding the various strategies, and SEL programs demonstrate that these skills can be cultivated within an educational setting. Nevertheless, the impact of such programs is limited when the central human factor, the teacher, is not equipped with the necessary training and support.

The knowledge gap identified, the question of the psychological mechanisms linking relationships with significant adult figures to the development of emotional regulation among elementary school students in Israel, against the backdrop of recent crises, underscores the urgent need for systematic, contextually appropriate Israeli research. Such research may serve as the basis for developing practical tools that will help teachers and the entire education system to cultivate emotional regulation and psychological resilience among students. These questions will be addressed in a subsequent article focusing on teacher-student attachment theory.

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