

The Zones of Regulation

<http://www.zonesofregulation.com/index.html>

All the Zones are OK! Tips for Managing the Zones You're In

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Feelings are innate; they make us human and are part of the fabric of life. Our feelings are windows into the thoughts and perspectives we hold toward a situation, a person, or an event. As a mom and therapist, I catch myself from time to time telling someone, “Don’t worry...” or “Don’t be sad...” only to remind myself “It’s too late, the other person is already worried or sad.” Rather than offering support in the form of telling others not to feel this way or that, we can help people manage the feelings they are experiencing in an adaptive and prosocial way.

I created The Zones of Regulation (The Zones) to help us do just that: support people in managing all the feelings they experience, without passing judgment on what people are feeling or how they are behaving. The Zones framework was turned into a curriculum and published by Social Thinking in 2011, titled [*The Zones of Regulation: A Curriculum Designed to Foster Self-Regulation and Emotional Control*](#). Since that time I have expanded it into two apps, [*The Zones of Regulation*](#) and [*The Zones of Regulation: Exploring Emotions*](#) (Kuypers, 2013/2015, Selosoft, Inc. www.zonesofregulation.com).

The core focus of Zones is to positively support the acquisition of self-regulation skills, especially in school-age children as they learn to work together as a group. Yet, some people are using The Zones in a way that may appear as a disciplinary tool or to project shame on others for their lack of regulation skills. This is *not* how The Zones is designed to be taught! It is vital to understand ALL THE ZONES ARE OK! There are no good or bad Zones. The Zone we are in is determined by how we feel on the inside, not the behavior on the outside.

When self-evaluating what Zone we are in, we consider our emotions as well as our sensory state (e.g., “Is our arousal level low or high?”). Given the internal fluctuations in our feelings and states we experience over the course of a day, it is natural and quite possible that we are going to experience all of the Zones. At some point we may feel tired in the Blue Zone, calm in the Green Zone, worried in the Yellow Zone and possibly furious or elated in the Red Zone. Our brains are wired to send out internal messages that spark the feelings and shifts in arousal levels that we experience. That’s all happening on the inside. And, we can work to regulate those internal feelings and states so they are expressed in ways (on the outside) that meet our personal goals as well as the social demands of the context we are in. We all feel angry or sad or lethargic from time to time; it’s just part of being human. Likewise, we will all be in each of the four Zones from time to time. That’s to be expected. Let’s consider the following scenario.

You get a text message that makes you feel irate and in an instant you’re in the Red Zone while in a classroom full of people. Your instinct is to slam down the phone and grunt but you’re aware of the social context (i.e., you’re using your social thinking). You understand

that this behavior would be *unexpected* (Winner & Crooke, 2008) in the classroom and will likely create uncomfortable feelings in the people around you. In addition, you realize fueling the emotion may distract you from the learning you are motivated to do. Therefore, you manage your zone using your self-regulation tools. For instance, you might take a deep breath and use your inner coach (positive self-talk) to figure out the size of the problem and tell yourself this is a small problem and you can handle it. Inside you are boiling in the Red Zone, but on the outside, others see you as in control and possibly a slight bit distracted. Some others may even still see you as being in the Green Zone.

Let's take that same scenario of receiving a text message that makes you irate and change the context by having you be home alone in your kitchen. In both scenarios, the text triggers you into the Red Zone and you're feeling irate. However, in this context, you manage your Red Zone differently and vocalize your frustration by grunting and slamming your phone down. You may use less effort to control your Red Zone when alone (the social demands are low) and there is not a high-stakes task you are trying to accomplish.

It seems that some people can get confused in using The Zones when they mistakenly classify someone in a Zone based on his or her external behavior rather than the person's internal feelings. It's worth repeating: our behavior DOES NOT determine the Zone! Our behavior is a by-product of how we manage our Zone. The Zones curriculum teaches individuals to become aware of their feelings and provides tools people can use to regulate those feelings rather than being at the mercy of their feelings. When we MANAGE our Zone, it is expressed in a way (our behaviors) that is adaptive and prosocial given the current situation.

To help us (as well as our students and clients) figure out how to manage a Zone, context comes into play. Context is all around us and is ever changing. Peter Vermeulen, an international author, expert, and speaker in the area of context and autism explains, "Context helps us to understand what we see, hear, feel, smell, etc..." (pg. 29, *Autism as Context Blindness*, 2012). Some people mistakenly consider the context of the environment and assume that a behavior(s) consistent with one of the Zones is the norm and that a certain Zone is expected in that context; for instance "the Green Zone is expected in the classroom." This assumption may be based on the overall behaviors of the majority of people in that environment (students are remaining quiet and listening) or it may stem from considering the internal state that allows us to efficiently execute the tasks that are required of us in that context. But again, those are behavioral expectations and The Zones is about regulating what goes on inside – our feeling states. Viewing context this way becomes a problem when we set an expectation for the context that includes not just behaviors but feelings too, such as "We need to be in the Green Zone in the classroom" and some of our students are not feeling calm, organized or happy in that context.

Rather than pressuring our students or clients to be in a certain Zone based on the behavior expectations of a context, we need to be using context to help us determine how to help them manage whatever Zone they are in at the moment. *Context does not define what we should feel or the Zone we should be in.* As Peter Vermeulen suggests, context gives us more understanding of our feelings. Let's look at the following situation to illustrate this idea further.

Theo witnesses his parents fighting during breakfast and hears his father threaten to move out (the trigger to his feelings). Theo is feeling sad (feeling) and has a low level of arousal (his state), which puts him in the Blue Zone. This feeling and state stays with him as he enters his classroom that morning (context changes). It's not as if we can tell Theo he can't feel that way because "it's expected to be in the Green Zone in the classroom." Rather, we need to allow Theo his feelings and meet him where he is to help him self-regulate within the context he is now in. For instance, the teacher might check-in with Theo, empathize, and support him in thinking about what Zone he is in, whether he needs to manage his Zone, and reviewing tool options to help him care for his Blue Zone. This is in stark contrast to a teacher who is incorrectly teaching Zones by making a threat and expecting a student to be in the Green Zone or incur a consequence. Not only does this approach dismisses Theo's feelings, it also projects shame and is a missed opportunity to build a relationship, establish trust and support Theo in developing self-regulation skills. Helping Theo find a tool such as *talk to an adult* or look at his *Book of Joy* (a homemade book filled with images/text of things that bring him joy) allows him to manage his Blue Zone so he can meet the classroom demands.

We have an incredible responsibility and opportunity to foster self-regulation skills in the populations we serve in a positive and prosocial way and The Zones of Regulation can help do just that. When implementing The Zones, it is important to keep these four basic principles in mind:

1. It is natural to experience all of the Zones; there is no bad zone.
2. Our Zone is defined by the feelings and internal states we experience on the inside.
3. Our behavior is a byproduct of how we manage our Zone; therefore, consequences should not be tied to a Zone.
4. The context we are in helps us figure out how to manage our Zone so our behavior meets the demands of the social environment, and in doing so we are able to achieve the tasks we are trying to accomplish and/or the social goals we've set for ourselves in that situation.

When we respect our students and the feelings they have, we can approach teaching self-regulation through the perspective of understanding, compassion, and assistance, rather than behavior expectations, rewards, and consequences. In the end, we'll do more to help them learn to self-regulate their thoughts, feelings, and internal states so they can co-exist with others and accomplish the goals, both big and small, they hope to achieve no matter what Zone they are in and whatever context they find themselves.