

# Regulate, Relate, Reason

## Parenting Strategies



A parent's guide to calmer, stronger connections  
through co-regulation and communication



**CAMHS**  
Child & Adolescent Mental  
Health Services



Emotional Wellbeing Team in Schools  
(EWTs)  
A programme of Support for Post Primary Schools



**CYPSP**  
Child & Young Person Support Partnership

SCAN ME

**Youth Wellness Web**



# Introduction

## Understanding School-Based Anxiety

For many children and young people, school can be a source of significant stress and anxiety. Whether it's worries about friendships, fear of failure, sensory overload, separation from home, or social pressures, these feelings can deeply impact a child's ability to attend, participate, and thrive in the school environment.

As parents and carers, it's natural to want to help — to offer advice, reassure, or convince them that everything will be okay. But when anxiety takes hold, children often can't think clearly or respond to logic — because their brains and bodies are in survival mode.

That's where the "Regulate, Relate, Reason" model becomes an essential tool.

## What Is "Regulate, Relate, Reason"?

This three-step approach is rooted in neuroscience and trauma-informed practice. It helps us respond to our children in ways that meet their emotional and physiological needs, especially during moments of distress or overwhelm.

### 1. Regulate

Before anything else, we help our child calm their nervous system. This might involve breathing techniques, physical movement, sensory input, or simply creating a safe and quiet space. When a child is dysregulated, they can't think clearly or take in information.

### 2. Relate

Once calmer, we focus on connection. Through a calm tone, empathy, and presence, we let our child know they are safe, seen, and supported. This emotional connection builds trust and safety — the foundation for learning and problem-solving.

### 3. Reason

Only after regulation and connection can we begin to talk through the issue. Together, we can explore what's worrying them, offer reassurance, and help them build confidence and problem-solving skills over time.

## Why This Matters

Anxious children aren't "being difficult" — they're doing their best with the tools they have. Understanding what's going on beneath the surface of their behaviour helps us respond with compassion rather than frustration.

## This booklet is here to offer:

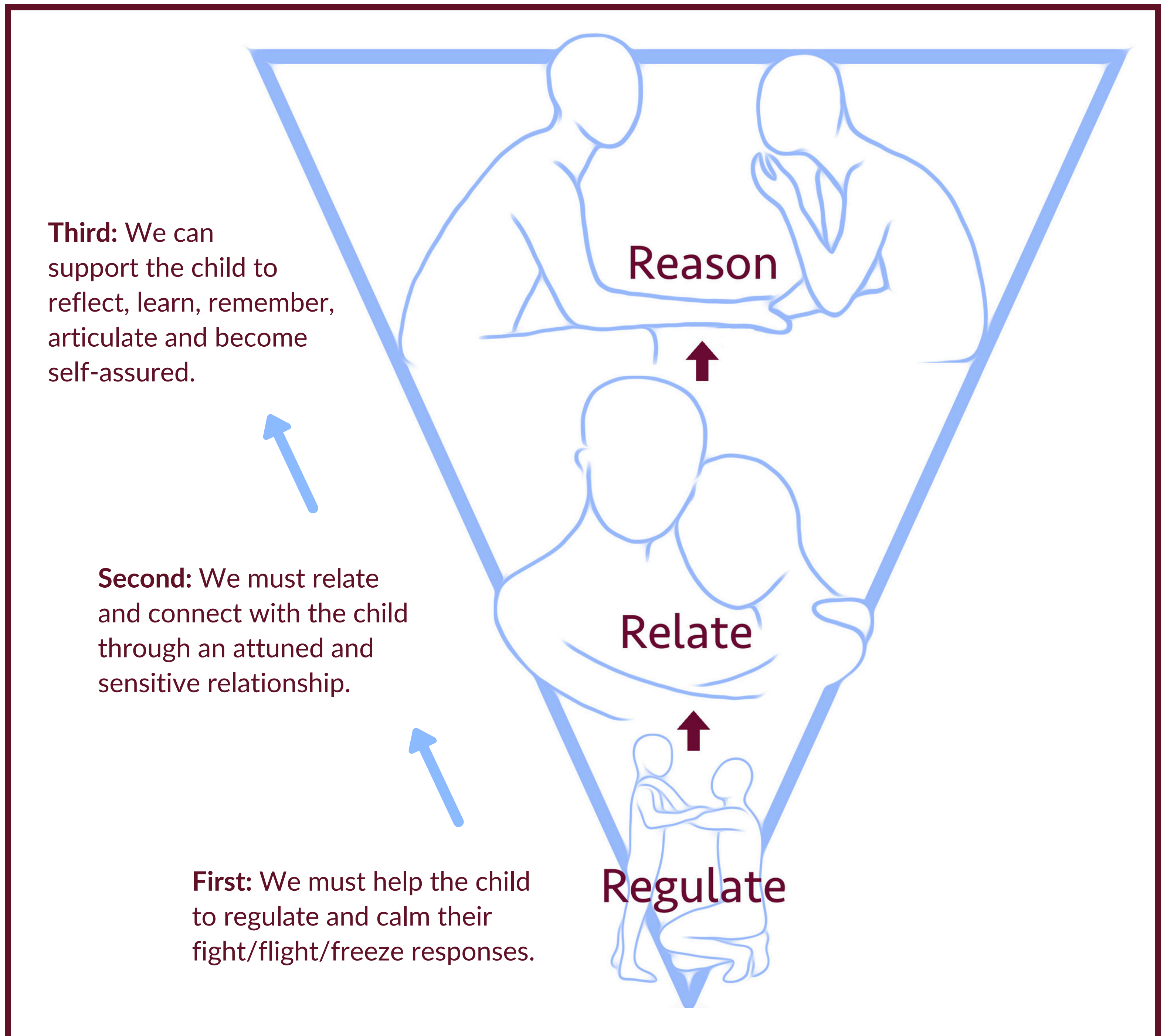
Practical strategies for each step of the model

Simple, trauma-informed tools to support your child

Encouragement and clarity for the tough days

**You are not alone. With support and small, consistent steps, your child can begin to feel safer, calmer, and more confident at school — and you can feel more equipped to walk beside them.**

## The Three R's: Reaching The Learning Brain



Heading straight for the 'reasoning' part of the brain with an expectation of learning, will not work so well if the child is dysregulated and disconnected from others.



# REGULATE

The goal here is to soothe the nervous system before any emotional processing or conversation.

## Helping Your Child Calm Their Body and Brain

When a child is anxious, their body often reacts before their brain can catch up — rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, stomach-aches, tears, or even freezing. In these moments, our first job is not to fix the problem, but to help them feel safe in their body.

## Why Regulation Comes First

Children can't listen, reason, or make decisions while in a state of emotional distress. Before we talk, we regulate.

## What Regulation Might Look Like:

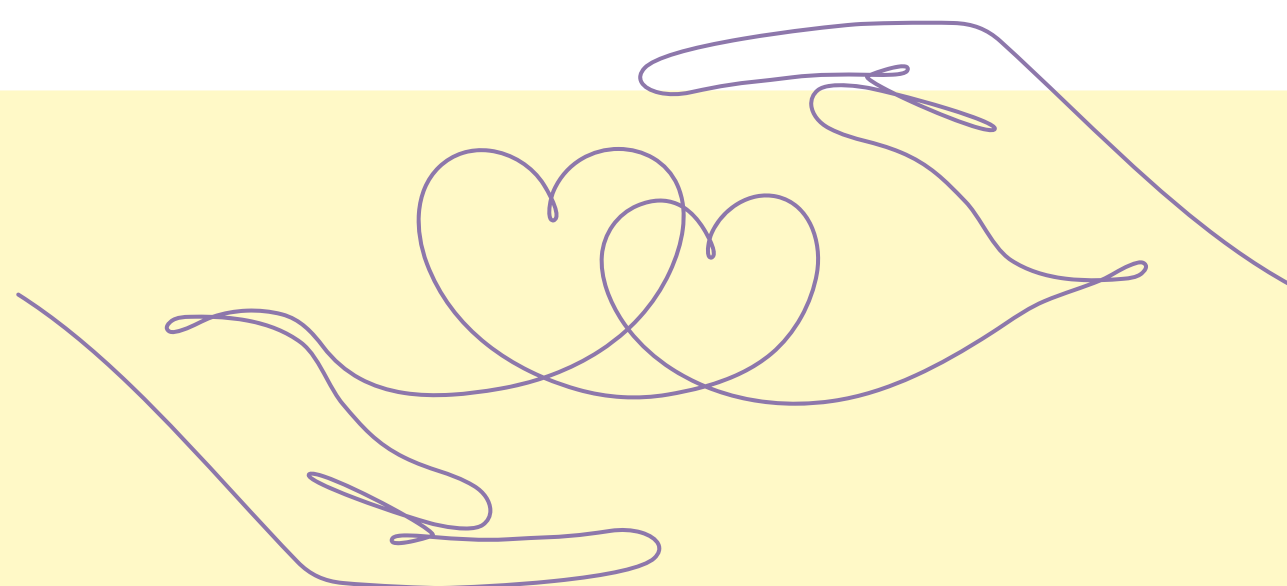
- Deep breathing together — e.g. "Smell the flower, blow out the candle, or box breathing."
- Movement breaks — walking outside, jumping on a trampoline, swinging, skipping.
- Sensory input — squeezing a stress ball, holding a warm drink, soothing music, weighted blanket.
- Rhythmic activities — rocking, drumming, tapping, humming a song.
- Calm space — a quiet room, headphones, low lighting, a favourite stuffed toy.

## Tips for Parents:

- Stay calm yourself. Children borrow our calm when they've lost theirs.
- Avoid talking too much in the heat of the moment.
- Use a gentle tone, slow movements, and few words.
- Think "soothing first, solutions later."

## Try this:

Instead of saying "There's nothing to be afraid of," try "Let's take a few deep breaths together until your body feels a bit better."



# RELATE

**Building Connection and Emotional Safety**  
Once calm, the parent connects emotionally with the child to create trust and empathy.

## Building Connection Before Correction

Once your child is calmer, it's time to focus on emotional connection. Anxiety often makes children feel alone or misunderstood — connection is what brings them back into relationship and safety.

## Why Relating Is Key

When children feel seen and heard, their stress lowers. They're more likely to engage, listen, and open up. Empathy is powerful medicine.

## What Relating Might Look Like:

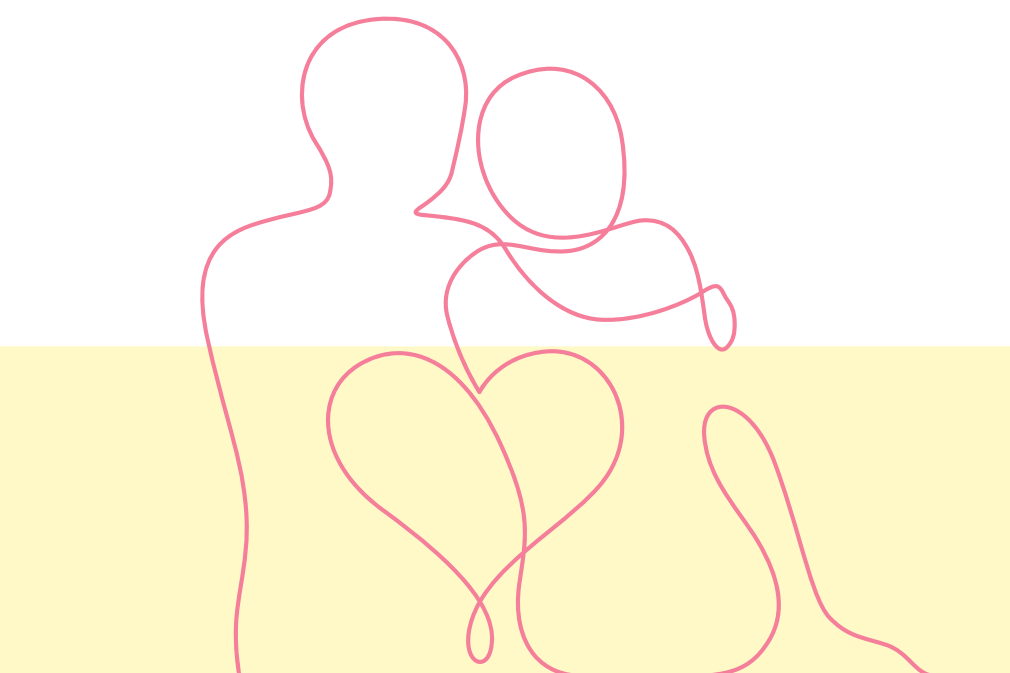
- Validating their feelings: "That sounds really hard," or "I can see why you'd feel nervous."
- Physical connection (if welcomed): a hug, sitting beside them, holding a hand.
- Listening without rushing: Let them talk (or not talk) in their own time.
- Using gentle language: "I'm here with you," "You're safe," "We'll get through this together."
- Shared activities: Engage in calm, enjoyable interactions (drawing together, baking, listening to music) to reinforce connection.

## Tips for Parents:

- Avoid minimising their feelings ("It's not a big deal") — even if it feels small to you.
- Don't jump into problem-solving too quickly.
- Use eye contact, warmth, and open body language.

## Try this:

"I know mornings have been hard lately. I'm proud of you for trying. I'm here with you, always."



# REASON

## Engaging the Thinking Brain

When the child is calm and connected, parents can gently introduce problem-solving and reflection.

### Problem-Solving Together — When They're Ready

Once your child is regulated and connected, their thinking brain is more online — this is the time to gently begin exploring what's going on and how to work through it together.

### Why Reason Comes Last

Trying to reason too early often makes things worse — they can't take it in when their brain is in "survival mode." But once calm and safe, children are better able to reflect, listen, and plan.

### What Reasoning Might Look Like:

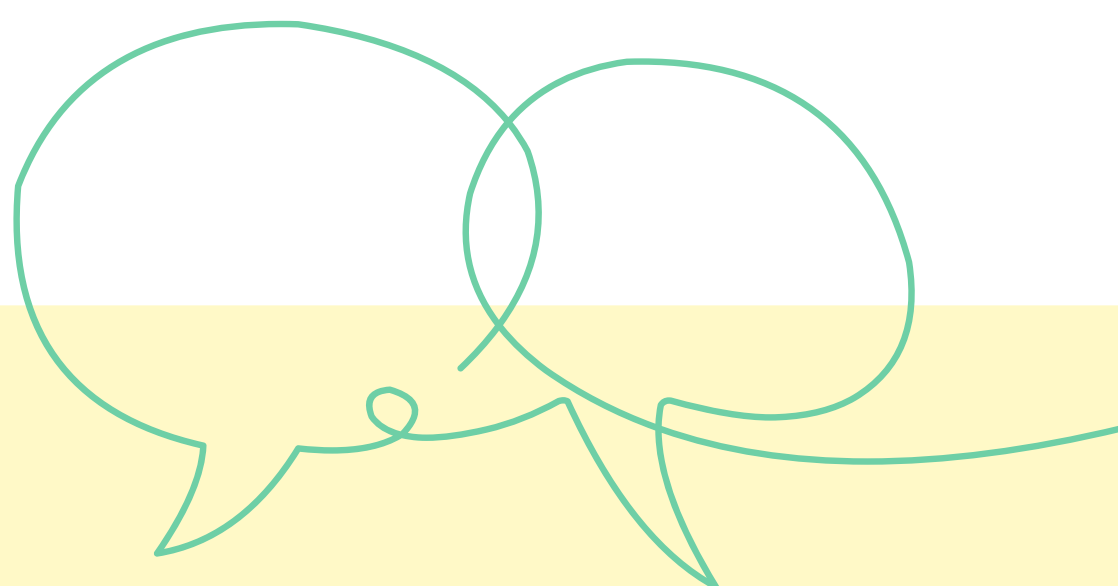
- Naming the worry: "What's the hardest part about school right now?"
- Collaborative problem-solving: "What might help tomorrow feel easier?"
- Teach coping skills: Introduce journaling, CBT-style thought reframes, or mindfulness strategies when they are open to learning.
- Offering choices: "Would you like me to walk you to the gate or just drop you off?"
- Making a plan: Using visuals, routines, or step-by-step strategies.

### Tips for Parents:

- Keep expectations realistic — progress is rarely linear.
- Involve your child in the solutions when possible.
- Celebrate small wins — every step forward matters.

### Try this:

"Let's figure this out together. What's one thing we could try next time to help it feel a little easier?"



# Real Life Scenarios

## Example 1: The Morning Meltdown

**Scenario:**  
Luca, age 8, starts crying and saying he feels sick every morning before school. He clings to his parent and begs not to go.

**Old Reaction:**  
“Come on, we’ve been over this. You have to go. You’ll be fine once you get there!”

**Regulate:**  
Parent notices Luca’s breathing is shallow and face is flushed. They kneel down, offer a long hug, and say, “Let’s sit down together and take a few slow breaths.”

**Relate:**  
Parent says, “Mornings feel really hard right now, huh? It makes sense. Saying goodbye can be tough.” Luca nods, clinging tighter.

**Reason:**  
Once calmer, parent asks gently, “Can you tell me what part feels the scariest today?” Luca says he’s worried his teacher will call on him to read aloud. Together, they come up with a plan to ask the teacher if he can opt out for the day.

## Example 2: Anxiety Around Social Pressure

**Scenario:**  
Maya, age 15, says she doesn’t want to go to school but won't explain why. She becomes irritated when her parent asks questions, replying with “Just leave me alone!”

**Old Reaction:**  
“You’re being dramatic — if something was wrong, you’d just say it.”

**Regulate:**  
Parent offers Maya space. Later, they bring her a snack and sit nearby without pushing conversation.

**Relate:**  
Parent says, “I know it’s not easy to talk sometimes. But if something’s bothering you, you don’t have to deal with it alone. You matter to me.”

**Reason:**  
Maya eventually shares that there’s group drama and she’s being excluded online. Parent helps her explore healthy boundaries and how to ask for support from a trusted adult at school.

## Example 3: Refusing To Go To School

**Scenario:**  
Ella, age 14, tells her parent she "can’t do it" and refuses to get out of bed. She’s missed several days already and becomes angry when pressured to attend.

**Old Reaction:**  
“This is getting ridiculous. You’re falling behind and just making it worse for yourself!”

**Regulate:**  
Parent softens their approach, sits at the end of the bed and says, “You look overwhelmed right now. Let’s take a few minutes and just breathe.”

**Relate:**  
After some time, the parent says, “I get that this is really hard. You’re not lazy — something’s making this feel impossible right now. I’m here to listen, not judge.”

**Reason:**  
Ella eventually admits she’s been getting panic attacks in class. Together, they explore speaking with the school counsellor and arranging a phased return to school with fewer pressures.