

Life is 10% what happens to us and 90% how we react to it. -Charles Swindoll

Self-regulation is something everyone continually works on, whether we are cognizant of it or not. We all encounter trying circumstances that test our limits from time to time. If we are able to recognize when we are becoming less regulated, we are able to do something about it to feel better and get ourselves to a better place. This comes naturally for some, but for others it is a skill that needs to be taught and practiced. This is the goal of The Zones of Regulation (or The Zones for short).



What are The Zones of Regulation?

The Zones is a systematic, cognitive behavior approach used to teach self-regulation by categorizing all the different ways we feel and states of alertness we experience into four concrete zones. The Zones curriculum provides strategies to teach students to become more aware of, and independent in, controlling their emotions and impulses, managing their sensory needs, and improving their ability to problem solve conflicts.

By addressing underlying deficits in emotional and sensory regulation, executive functions, and social cognition, the curriculum is designed to help move students towards independent regulation. The Zones of Regulation incorporates Social Thinking® (www.socialthinking.com) concepts and numerous visuals to help students identify their feelings/level of alertness, understand how their behavior impacts those around them, and learn what tools they can use to regulate to a more expected state.

The Four Zones

The **Red Zone** is used to describe extremely heightened states of alertness and intense emotions. A person may be elated or experiencing anger, rage, explosive behavior, devastation, or terror when in the Red Zone. A person is described as "out of control" if in the Red Zone.

The **Yellow Zone** is also used to describe a heightened state of alertness and elevated emotions; however, one has some control when they are in the Yellow Zone. A person may be experiencing stress, frustration, anxiety, excitement, silliness, the wiggles, or nervousness when in the Yellow Zone.

The **Green Zone** is used to describe a calm state of alertness. A person may be described as happy, focused, content, or ready to learn when in the Green Zone. This is the Zone students predominately need to be in the classroom.

The **Blue Zone** is used to describe low states of alertness, such as when one feels sad, tired, sick, or bored.

The Zones can be compared to traffic signs. When given a green light or in the Green Zone, one is "good to go". A yellow sign means slow down or take caution, which applies to the Yellow Zone. A red light or stop sign means stop, and when one is in the Red Zone, this is the case. The Blue Zone can be compared to the rest area signs where one goes to re-energize. All of the zones are expected at one time or another, but the curriculum focuses on teaching the students how to figure out what zone is expected based on the environment and people around them. For example, when playing on the playground or in an active/competitive game, no one would think twice about one being in the Yellow Zone but that would not be same in the library.

The Story Behind The Zones

As an occupational therapist and autism resource specialist working in public schools for six years, I too frequently had students on my caseload who struggling not just with sensory-regulation, but also emotional regulation. Too often, time spent with their non-disabled peers was being limited due to my student's frequent outbursts and inability to cope effectively. Adopting Ross Greene's mantra, "Kids do well if they can" (*The Explosive Child*, 2006), students were frequently being punished for disruptive behaviors rather than being taught skills to remedy their behavior. Through taking graduate coursework on Autism Spectrum Disorders and Attention Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder, I had the idea to create the concept of The Zones of Regulation to teach students to self-regulate their sensory needs as well as their emotions and impulses in order to meet the demands of the environment and be successful academically, as well as socially.

After successfully piloting and expanding on my concept with the students I worked with over a few years span of time, I was encouraged by my colleagues to create a curriculum to support my concept. The Zones of Regulation concept was influenced by the work of Williams and Shellenberger's *The Alert Program*® (1994) and Kari Dunn Buron and Mitzi Curtis' *The Incredible 5 Point Scale* (2003). As I was designing the curriculum, I integrated best practices in the field of autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) into the curriculum and conducted extensive background research in the area of self-

regulation, including sensory regulation, emotional regulation, and executive functioning. I also researched how these processes relate to children with ASD and ADHDs' learning styles. By integrating principles of Simon Baron Cohen's Systemizing Theory, The Zones provides a system to classify states of arousal, feelings, and emotions into four easily identifiable distinct color-coded Zones. Creating a system such as The Zones to categorize all the complex feelings students experience eases students' ability to recognize and communicate how they are feeling, as well as tap into strategies to aid them in self-regulation. While designing the curriculum, I incorporated Michelle Garcia Winner's [Social Thinking®](#) concepts to help students become more aware of how others are perceiving them when they are regulated versus in less regulated states. By tying in Social Thinking concepts, the lessons on self-regulation become more meaningful to the students' lives, as they gain a deeper understanding of the impact their behavior has on their relationships. Learning activities entail the use of cognitive behavior management strategies to reinforce the use of The Zones of Regulation throughout the student's day. By using cognitive behavior management, the students learn how to independently self-monitor and reflect on the effectiveness of their calming and sensory strategies. This method allows students to move away from staff prompts to regulate and to assume personal responsibility in self-regulation.