

# Skill Stacking for Emotional Regulation

**Created by:** Dr. Ashley DeLuccia, Mindful Behavior Therapy Coach

The Kids Mental Health Foundation notes that emotion regulation skills are best learned when calm, and that coping activities can include deep breathing, movement or exercise, mindfulness and meditation, listening to music, and using distractions. These strategies help children build a toolbox of healthy responses they can draw on during moments of stress, frustration, or emotional overwhelm.

**Purpose:** Help children manage big feelings by combining coping strategies into powerful, personalized “skill stacks.”

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## What is Skill Stacking?

**Skill stacking** is the intentional combination of two or more coping strategies to create a more powerful and personalized emotional regulation response. Think of it like a recipe—one ingredient is helpful, but together they make something more effective and satisfying.

Skill stacking teaches kids to proactively manage their emotions using strategies that work **together**—like pairing **movement with music** or **breathwork with positive self-talk**.

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## Why Skill Stacking Works

- **Engages multiple senses** for faster emotional grounding
  - **Builds flexibility** in coping responses
  - **Boosts self-efficacy**—kids learn what works for *them*
  - **Can be practiced proactively** (not just in crisis)
  - Works at home, in school, or on the go!
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## Examples of Skill Stacking Combinations

Skill 1	Skill 2	Example Activity
Movement	Music	Dance break to favorite song
Sensory	Social Support	Squeeze a fidget while talking to a trusted adult
Breathwork	Positive Self-Talk	Deep breathing with affirmations like “I am calm”
Visual Imagery	Nature Sounds	Imagine a safe place while listening to ocean sounds
Stretching/Yoga	Guided Reframing	Stretch while saying, “This feeling will pass”

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### Skill Stacking Checklist

Use this checklist to identify and personalize your child’s ideal skill stacks.

#### Step 1: Know Your Child’s Favorites

- ☐ Favorite music or sounds
- ☐ Comforting objects or textures
- ☐ Trusted people to talk to
- ☐ Enjoyable movements or physical activities
- ☐ Favorite places (real or imagined)

#### Step 2: Choose a Skill from Each Column

##### Body-based Skills

- ☐ Movement (walk, dance, yoga)
- ☐ Deep pressure (hugs, weighted items)
- ☐ Stretching
- ☐ Grounding (barefoot walking, holding an object)

##### Mind-based Skills

- ☐ Breathwork
- ☐ Positive self-talk
- ☐ Visualization
- ☐ Reframing thoughts
- ☐ Mindfulness (notice 5 things)

##### Social or Sensory Support

- ☐ Talking to a safe adult

- ☐ Listening to calming music
- ☐ Cuddling a pet or stuffed animal
- ☐ Using fidgets or sensory toys

### Step 3: Create Your Stacks

- ☐ Combine 2–3 skills into a stack
  - ☐ Name it something fun (e.g., “Calm Down Combo,” “Power Pause,” “My Reset Routine”)
  - ☐ Practice stacks during calm times
  - ☐ Make it visual and post them where your child can see them
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## Implementation Ideas

- **Create a Skill Stack Menu:** Let your child draw or decorate their favorite stacks on a chart or card.
  - **Practice Daily:** Use stacks before bedtime, during transitions, or after school.
  - **Model It:** Show your own stack in action! (“When I’m stressed, I take deep breaths and squeeze my stress ball.”)
  - **Use Visuals:** Picture cards or mini posters help non-readers remember their stacks.
  - **Build a Calm Corner:** Equip it with music, sensory tools, visuals, and space for movement.
  - **In the Classroom:** Make skill stacking part of your calm-down routine, brain breaks, or group time.
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### **Bonus: Sample Skill Stacking Card**

**Name of Stack:** Ocean Calm

**What’s in it:**

-  Listen to ocean wave sounds
-  Rub smooth stone in pocket
-  5 slow breaths with “I am safe”

*Keep stack cards in a lanyard, binder ring, or posted in a calm space.*

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