



Finding the self in self-regulation

A Froebel Trust early childhood
research highlight by Dr Sue Robson



Froebelian principles

This research highlight considers self-regulation in early childhood. It makes links between research and practice in Froebelian education today.

Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was the inventor of kindergarten and a pioneer of early childhood education and care. Froebel's work and writing changed the way we think about and value early childhood. [The principles](#) of his work continue to challenge and be relevant to modern early childhood education.

A Froebelian approach to education reflects the wholeness of Froebel's ideas and brings together all the principles of his work. This research highlight makes particular connection to five of the principles:

- **Unity and connectedness**
- **Autonomous learners**
- The value of childhood in its own right
- **Relationships matter**
- Creativity and the power of symbols
- **The central importance of play**
- Engaging with nature
- **Knowledgeable and nurturing educators**

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Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early childhood education at froebel.org.uk

What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation has become an increasingly important topic in discussions about young children's development. It is now recognised as crucially important for young children's **holistic development, lifelong learning and life skills** ¹ – but what is it?

Self-regulation is a holistic process, with emotion regulation and cognitive regulation supporting the regulation of behaviour. It is not just a matter of regulating behaviour, nor is it only concerned with cognition. **It affects (and is affected by) all aspects of children's development.** ²

It is easy to see the links with Froebel's emphasis on a holistic approach to learning:

Self-regulation is about 'strategically planning, monitoring, and regulating cognition, behaviour, and motivation.' ³

Froebel's ideas



Self-regulation

Advocacy of self-activity, self-reflection, autonomy, thinking for oneself. ⁴

Why do we need to think about developing young children's self-regulation?

The evidence about the importance of self-regulation has led some people to suggest that its development should be one of the main aims of education. The Education Endowment Foundation (2019) also found that **educators' efforts to enhance it can be both very effective, and low-cost.** ⁵

Looking at ways to support and develop self-regulation may be especially **valuable for children with low levels of self-regulatory skill** ⁶ and children at risk, for example, because poverty or income inequality are having negative effects on their **environments, relationships or feelings of self-worth.** ⁷

How can we help young children to develop self-regulation?

The groundwork for young children's self-regulation begins very early in life. Look, for example, at how even very young babies begin attempting to soothe themselves, in early efforts to manage and regulate their emotions.

As Froebel emphasises, providing a wide range of rich experiences, and opportunities for exploration, support this development.



How does co-regulation help children to develop self-regulation?

Co-regulation, when adults and children engage together, with a shared purpose ⁸, provides the vital first steps for young children in developing their self-regulation. This very social process is underpinned by the mutual understandings we share when we communicate with one another, often referred to as **intersubjectivity**. ⁹

The Early Years Coalition ¹⁰ identify 3 basic ways in which adults can support the development of co-regulation:

Positive Relationships

Warm, responsive relationships where children feel respected, comforted and supported and confident they are cared for.

Learning and Development

Teaching self-regulation through modelling, suggesting strategies, providing opportunities to practice and scaffolding children's efforts.

Enabling Environments

An environment that supports self-regulation, is predictable, physically and emotionally safe and supports risk-taking.

Which contexts are particularly valuable for developing self-regulation?

Just about everything a young child does has the potential for developing and enhancing their **self-regulation** ¹¹, but some contexts may be especially valuable. These link very clearly with Froebel's ideas about young children's learning:

'Froebel saw children as active, curious, creative learners who learn best through activity, play, talk, and self-reflection' ¹²

(Helen Tovey, 2020)

Activity: choice and self-direction

Both **child- and adult-initiated activities support children's self-regulation** ¹³ but, as Froebel emphasises, children's opportunities for choice and **self-direction** ¹⁴ are particularly valuable. In child-initiated activities children may:

- be clearer about what they are doing and why they are doing it
- generate more ideas
- set their own targets
- use a wider range of strategies
- self-monitor
- collaborate and help one another more.

Problem-solving may be particularly valuable for helping children to develop and display **self-regulation**. ¹⁵



Play

Children's self-chosen play of all kinds gives them direct, first-hand opportunities to try things out, persevere, and develop strategies for learning and self-regulation – emotional, social, cognitive and behavioural. For Froebel,¹⁶ 'Play is the highest level of child development. It is the spontaneous expression of thought and feeling'.

Pretend play may be especially valuable:¹⁷

'Pretend play gives many opportunities for children to focus their thinking, persist and plan ahead.'

(Development Matters, 2021:11)¹⁸



Talk

Talk, both to yourself and with others, is vital to the development of self-regulation. Talking to yourself, or '**private speech**'¹⁹ can help children to:

- think
- maintain focus
- be motivated – telling yourself, 'I can do this' or 'I know who can help me'
- regulate emotions – telling yourself to '**stay calm**'.²⁰

Adults can help young children become aware of talk as a powerful tool for thinking and for sharing their thoughts. They can support children's self-regulation by:

- modelling talk about thinking and feeling
- helping children to develop a vocabulary about thinking and feeling
- helping children to develop strategies for shared talk with others: **listening, taking turns to talk, trying to reach agreement.**²¹



Self-reflection

Being able to reflect on our thinking is fundamental to the development of self-regulation, as [Froebel highlights](#).²²

In talking with children, adults can encourage the children's own reflections about [what they have been doing, thinking and learning](#).²³ Doing so can:

- develop children's metacognitive knowledge (knowledge about themselves as learners)
- support children's reflection on their own, and others', knowledge and feelings
- support emotional and motivational regulation
- help educators find out about aspects of children's thinking that are not directly observable, as [children talk about their ideas](#).²⁴

Photographs and videos of children's activities provide ideal starting points for dialogues with them about their thinking. Together, they provide rich evidence, for discussion, assessment and recording.





Reflecting on self-regulation

Has your thinking about self-regulation changed in any way after reading this? For example, do you see self-regulation as a holistic idea, or is it more connected for you to a particular aspect of young children's development?

Do you think your understanding of self-regulation has deepened? Can you think of something you know more about now than you did before you read this?

Look back at the contexts discussed on pages 6-8 - are there things you might now do in relation to the children's activity, play, talk or self-reflection which could support both their self-regulation and your opportunities to observe and document it?

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