

Early Years Library

Victoria Nazaruk/Unsplash

Laying the foundations: Supporting children's self-regulation



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What is self-regulation?

Self-regulation enables children to adjust to new situations, reflect on and adapt their behaviours, focus their attention, remember instructions, and plan how to approach tasks successfully. Self-regulation develops rapidly in early childhood, especially during the years before children start formal school. Along with other skills like engagement, persistence and self-confidence, self-regulation supports children's lifelong learning and development in a range of areas from literacy and numeracy to friendships and even healthy living.

Children practise and refine their self-regulation skills in everyday activities such as doing puzzles (e.g. working memory helps to imagine turning a shape around in your mind), language activities (e.g. talking while playing to plan what will happen next), early literacy activities (e.g. flexibly moving between strategies for writing), and social activities (e.g. taking turns). These skills are also practised during traditional games like freeze games (e.g. where children have to think about what they are doing, instead of being impulsive).

In this evidence-informed guidance, we describe what adults can do to support five areas of self-regulation:



How can adults support children's self-regulation?

Children's self-regulation develops throughout everyday activities when they experience a 'just right' level of challenge in a supportive and positive learning environment. As a practitioner, you might recognise there are many activities already present in your setting that stretch children's self-regulation (e.g. songs that switch between fast and slow; children being responsible for clearing the table after lunch). Having 'just enough' scaffolding, not too much and not too little, helps children build self-regulation, for example gentle support like cues for remembering multi-step instructions, or prompts for sharing and taking turns.

Research shows that each child develops in a unique way, rather than following a strictly linear pre-defined route through development in a specific order or timeframe. Practitioners can use their professional judgement to gauge which elements of these skills a child may benefit from focusing on at different times.

Children's self-regulation also benefits from some unstructured time. Allowing children to play independently, without adult involvement, makes space for them to work through challenges and find their own solutions when things are tricky.



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Supporting self-regulation in everyday practice

Being adaptable and flexible

Support children to be adaptable and flexible learners by providing opportunities for them to think of different ways to approach tasks, consider problems from different perspectives, and be flexible and embrace changes in situations and routines.

As part of being an adaptable and flexible learner children can: think of new ideas to solve problems; attempt to complete tasks in a number of different ways; coordinate with peers; and keep trying different ways when their attempt was not successful.

- Make sure children have easy access to materials that might help them to solve problems such as tape, glue, sticks, scissors, rope or string. Being adaptable and flexible helps children work through difficulties on their own or with the help of an adult or a peer, and supports them to problem solve in tasks and social situations.
- During every day practice, look out for opportunities for children to brainstorm different solutions to problems (e.g., I lost my jumper, we both want the same toy, a ball is stuck in a tree).
- When completing puzzles, building towers, or making train tracks, encourage children to think about what might happen if they put pieces in different places, or what happens if they don't have the piece they need.
- Support children to do things in different ways. For instance, ask children to think of different ways to show '5' with their fingers, or to build different types of bridges from blocks and other materials.

Having some control over behaviours and reactions

Support children to learn how to control their behaviours and to stop or delay automatic and impulsive reactions. As part of being able to control behaviours and reactions, children can: control their focus and attention to complete a task, for example they are able to stay on task despite having distractions in their environment; control their behavioural responses, such as not interrupting during a conversation and taking turns; and control their motor responses, such as staying seated during circle time.

- Play games that require children to focus their attention and inhibit or delay a response, for example 'Simon Says' or freeze games.
- Embed opportunities for children to practise behavioural and motor impulse control within day-to-day activities. For example, show a numeral or hold up a number of fingers and ask children to jump or clap exactly that many times and then stop.
- Embed opportunities for children to take turns in pairs or groups, for instance, while reading a story or counting out loud in turn.
- Use transitions between activities as an opportunity for children to practise inhibiting their behaviour. For example, at the end of the activity, ask children to stop what they are doing at the end of a countdown.

Holding information in mind while doing a task (working memory)

Supporting children's working memory (holding verbal and visual information in mind while doing a task) can involve giving small cues and reminders, and slowly building tasks up as children's abilities develop. Note, working memory is more than just remembering. It goes beyond straight memorisation and involves actively doing something with the information.

For example working memory is involved in: sequencing the steps in a story that have been mixed up in order; mentally visualising blocks to fit them together; following instructions that have an increasing number of steps at tidy-up time.

- **Embed opportunities for children to process information when reading a story, for example asking children to act out the events while remembering their order: *"And then what happens?"***
- **Embed games in your everyday practice. For example, place items on a tray (e.g. different shapes, feeling cards), give children 20-30 seconds to study the tray and ask them to cover their eyes. Remove some items and ask children to shout out which items have been taken away.**
- **Promote the development of working memory by giving children a short set of instructions (and build a longer list for those with bigger working memory capacity). It can help to model 'thinking out loud' about what they are doing.**

Planning ahead independently

Support children to plan ahead independently by encouraging them to make decisions about their work, identify steps to achieve their goals, and organise their actions in an intentional way. They may not always have the answers, but as their self-regulation develops, they will build on this foundation for talking about their learning.

- **During daily activities, embed opportunities to discuss with children what they are planning to complete a task and reflect on how it went afterwards. For example, ask them how they figured out what card comes next when putting the cards in order, or what they were really good at during a baking activity and what they found most tricky.**
- **Talk about step-by-step plans in everyday practice, such steps we can follow when meeting new friends.**
- **When children make a mistake (for instance making an addition error or incorrectly naming a character in a story), help them to try again and reflect on how to complete the task.**
- **During the day, announce changes from one activity to another, or build a routine with a tidy up song. For instance, 5 minutes before a transition, you might announce that children will soon need to put away their activities or play the song as a cue for children to get ready.**

Being mindful of experiences in the moment

Support children to be mindful of experience in the moment by helping children to tune into their bodily sensations, how they feel on the inside, and their five senses during everyday activities. For example, children can focus on their breathing; recognise when their voices are quiet and loud; notice how different toys and materials feel; and move in a space with awareness of their own bodies and others around them.

- Encourage children to think about using quiet inside voices, compared to loud outside voices when they are in the playground or park. Compare this to drum sounds and how it feels when the drum is played too loud.
- Model active listening poses and active watching actions for children (such as pulling their earlobes or holding their hands like binoculars) so they can show you when they are paying attention and ready to listen and learn.
- Encourage children to be different animals during role play, freezing and changing animals if they hear a bell. Discuss with children how it felt to be these different animals.
- When walking around the park or in the playground, draw children's attention to the sounds they can hear and ask if they can see where the sound is coming from.



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