

Focus points

What is self-regulation, why is it important, how does it affect development in the early years, and what role should practitioners play, asks **Dr Julian Grenier**, who led on the revised Early Years Foundation Stage guidance



Self-regulation is important for children's early learning. It is also vital for their lifelong mental health and well-being. That is why the revised *Development Matters* emphasises self-regulation in its first few pages.

So, what is self-regulation? To answer that question, we need to take a step back and consider the role of maturation in child development. As the brain and nervous system develop, young children get better at focusing their attention and planning their actions. This is 'executive function'. As the Harvard Center on the Developing Child explains, 'Just as an air traffic control system at a

busy airport safely manages the arrivals and departures of many aircraft on multiple runways, the brain needs this skill set to filter distractions, prioritise tasks, set and achieve goals, and control impulses.'

Imagine a baby who has started to crawl. The baby sees a shiny piece of coloured foil on the floor and wants to get it. To get it, the baby must ignore the distractions of other toys in the way, and keep focused on the foil. The baby has to co-ordinate crawling with its vision to head in the right direction. To pick up the foil and scrunch it, the baby needs to use hand-eye co-ordination. The baby uses their executive function to co-ordinate different mental and physical processes. Their executive function

Self-regulation depends on both nature and nurture

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MORE INFORMATION

'Developing self-regulation through physical play' is available at www.sirenfilm.co.uk – during the lockdown, you can access all of its films for a free, 30-day trial period; no card details required.

enables them to focus on their goal and ignore distractions.

NATURE AND NURTURE

Self-regulation depends on both nature and nurture. As the brain and nervous system develop, children need positive experiences of care, communication and play. These experiences support their growing ability to self-regulate. However, as researcher Hope Oloye outlines, some types of early experiences can lead to poorer self-regulation.

An example is living in a chaotic and noisy home with loud television on most of the time. Children in this type of home environment are likely to have high levels of emotional

dysregulation. They are also likely to have lower levels of independence (Oloye 2020).

EMOTIONAL AND COGNITIVE

Broadly, there are two aspects of self-regulation. There is emotional self-regulation, which is the capacity to manage your feelings when things get difficult. You can see that in action when children persevere with a difficult task, despite setbacks. If I bang my laptop in frustration because I can't get the sound to work on Zoom, I'm showing the limits of my emotional self-regulation.

Then there is cognitive self-regulation. You can see that developing in children when they increasingly manage to screen out distractions and keep on with the task at hand. If I start writing and then get distracted by my social media, I am showing a poor level of cognitive self-regulation.

At this point, you may have a picture in your mind of the children who have strong self-regulation. You may also be thinking about children you are working with who have weaker skills in this area. Children with weaker self-regulation will struggle with play, learning and friendships. They may struggle with the demands of schooling as they grow older. As the Education Endowment Foundation says in its Early Years Toolkit, 'The development of self-regulation and executive function is consistently linked with successful learning, including pre-reading skills, early mathematics and problem solving.'

'Strategies that seek to improve learning by increasing self-regulation have an average impact of five additional months' progress. A number of studies suggest that improving the self-regulation skills of children in the early years is likely to have a lasting positive impact on later learning at school, and also have a positive impact on wider outcomes such as behaviour and persistence.'

It is important to note that we have limited evidence about what works in this emerging area of early years practice. On a more positive note, there are many promising approaches. These are also consistent with our broader understanding of quality in the early years.

POSITIVE APPROACHES Co-regulation

Self-regulation develops over time. It is very hard for a small child to manage their feelings, control their desire to have what they want straight away, and to ignore distractions. We all find these aspects of life hard, to a greater or lesser extent. So, at times children need regulation by others, or 'co-regulation'.

This happens when a child and an adult adapt to each other's emotions, and it is one of the foundations of the key person approach. When a child is struggling with overwhelming emotions, it is important for the key person to be sympathetic and calm. The child gradually learns that impulses can be managed, and anger lived with, and that they won't be overwhelmed by those strong feelings.

We can be sympathetic to the wishes and impulses of young children, without acting as if 'anything goes'. Children can learn that all feelings are valid, but not all behaviours are. It is alright to feel angry, but it is not OK to hit or hurt.

The importance of physical development

In high-quality early years provision, it is understood that all of children's areas of development connect. At this year's Newham Early Years Conference, Professor Iram Siraj discussed the links between physical development, self-regulation and cognition.

She commented that 'more proficient gross motor skills result in better self-esteem, more favourable weight status, higher levels of physical activity and

→ ABOUT THIS SERIES

Development Matters (September 2020) is made up of two parts: an overview of seven key features of early years best practice, followed by tables setting out the pathways of children's development. This series aims to describe these seven features, explain their importance and show how settings can incorporate them in their practice, so that they can deliver high-quality provision that meets the needs of each child in their setting. The guidance is at: <https://bit.ly/2Fpxt5c>

cardiorespiratory fitness. Better physical development is associated with developments in cognition and self-regulation.'

Professor Siraj's point is illustrated in an eight-minute Siren film 'Developing self-regulation through physical play' (see More information).

Helping children become independent learners

Another promising approach involves helping children to become independent learners and decision-makers. In their important 2005 study, Holly Anderson, Penny Colman and David Whitebread discussed the development of independent learning in English nursery and Reception classes. Although this project is now quite old, many of its findings are still pertinent.

The research distinguishes between children who are independent in their setting, and children who are independent learners. Independence in the setting can be fostered by careful organisation, good storage and labelling, and so on. As a result, children learn to select and use resources, get themselves a snack or a drink, or decide where to play.

But developing your independence as a learner is different. It requires different types of sensitive adult interaction and support. Much of the research and developing practice in this area was inspired by Liz Brooker's work as a Reception teacher in the 1990s. She systematically discussed children's views of themselves as learners. She spent more time encouraging children to discuss how well they accomplished tasks, and less time praising them.

Helen Lewis (2017, 2018) and Tania Choudhury (2020) both found that younger nursery children can also engage in these kinds of discussions. They helped the children to become more aware of how they learnt, and what it means to learn. As a result, these very young children became more powerful learners over time. They could decide when to ask for help and who to call on, or when they would rather persevere and keep on trying.

Rosie Flewitt and Kate Cowan (2019) investigated how early years practitioners document children's learning. They found that



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children enjoyed reviewing and sharing the documentation about their learning. This sort of review, with a sensitive adult, can help children to reflect on their learning, as Dr Lewis and Ms Choudhury found.

However, Dr Flewitt and Dr Cowan found that, all too often, children could not access the documentation of their learning. Folders were high on shelves, and online learning journals were too difficult for children to use. Shortly after the publication on the study, Tapestry created a child login and made the platform easier for children to use.

In summary, we know a lot more about the sorts of practices which encourage independent learning. We know how we can encourage children to reflect on how they go about their learning. These practices can help children to develop their self-regulation.

Critical links to language development

One of the objectives of the revised EYFS is to put more emphasis on children's communication. Language is at the heart of learning in the early years and beyond.

The revised *Development Matters* states, 'Language development is central to self-regulation: children use language to guide their actions and plans. Pretend play gives many opportunities for children to focus their thinking, persist and plan ahead.'

That is why it is so important to notice children who are not developing their pretend play, and are not using language in play. They

need us to step in sensitively to help them. Yet often we don't. An important finding from Dr Flewitt and Dr Cowan's research is that we can miss many children's 'signs of learning'.

We often overlook children learning English as an additional language, children who spend much of their time in physical play outdoors, and children who do not seek adult attention.

This takes us back to the important distinction between children who are independent, and children who are independent learners. For example, NALDIC (the National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum, the UK's national subject association for English as an additional language) comments that 'it is assumed that young children will "pick up" English naturally and very quickly'.

In fact, learning a second language is hard, and children need skilful support from us. We also need to value and support their first language.

Sustained shared thinking

Iram Siraj and others have written extensively on the importance of shared sustained thinking (SST). SST is 'an episode in which two or more individuals "work together" in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative, etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend' (Siraj-Blatchford *et al* 2002).

This is rich and important, but something which we can only support sparingly. It means



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focusing on just one child, or a small group of children, for an extended period. It is hard to do that in busy early years settings!

If practitioners are less present in the play of children learning English as an additional language, those children may be left to play happily and independently. But

reflection points

This selection of the findings from Whitebread and others (2005) can help us to reflect on how well our provision promotes independent learning. Although their research study focused on children aged from three to five, their observations are useful or adaptable for practitioners working with any age group in the EYFS:

- The children learnt a great deal by watching one another.
- Given the opportunity to make their own choices and decisions, the children were remarkably focused and organised and pursued their own plans and agendas with persistence,

and sometimes over surprisingly long periods of time.

- Sometimes when an adult became involved in an activity, the children were more inclined to say they couldn't do something, but if they were working with another child, they were less likely to question their ability, and often mimicked the other child, gaining confidence in their abilities.
- The most effective response the practitioner can give to a child asking for help is to refer them to another child who has greater competence or expertise in the particular area.

- Sometimes it is best for adults not to intervene in children's disputes and disagreements in collaborative play, but give them time and space to resolve issues themselves.
- There is an important distinction between praise (which produces teacher-pleasers) and encouragement (which gives information/feedback and supports independence).
- Children differ between those who respond well to open-ended, child-initiated tasks and those who like a supportive structure established by an adult; both kinds of opportunities need to be provided.



they may miss out on SST and also the help they need to develop their English, learn new vocabulary, and talk about their learning.

Similarly, however hard it may be, we must be sensitively 'present' and engaged with the play of children who are mostly outdoors and with those who do not seek adult attention.

Otherwise they will also lose out on support for their play and language development. That, in turn, is likely to have a negative effect on their developing self-regulation, laying poor foundations for their later learning in school.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The American researchers Clancy Blair and Cybele Raver have powerfully illustrated how the stress of living in poverty can lead to family life becoming chaotic for young children. Stressful, noisy and disorganised home environments, where parents are focusing on daily survival, have a

negative impact on children's development of self-regulation.

Professor Blair and Dr Raver (2015) comment that 'children in poverty are far less likely than their higher-income counterparts to enter school ready to learn' and that they 'are also less likely to experience family, home, and neighborhood environments that foster prototypically optimal self-regulation, and as a consequence, the impact of available learning opportunities is reduced'.

Of course, every family is unique. There are many parents living in poverty who do a fine job to support their children, against the odds. But when we zoom back to see the big picture, we see that overall child poverty is strongly associated with more stressful family life and poorer conditions for children to develop their self-regulation. As a result, many children will be less ready to learn in their early years settings or school than their peers from better-off homes.

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Like so much of early childhood development, self-regulation is a product of both nature and nurture. It develops as a child grows older, with nurture and encouragement from others. When we support children's play, language, emotional well-being and physical skills, we are also supporting their self-regulation.

There is still a great deal that we don't know about how to foster self-regulation in young children. However, we know that it is critically important, and that we need to pay attention to children with poorer skills in this area. ■

Dr Julian Grenier led on the revision of Development Matters for the Department for Education. He is head teacher of Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre, east London, which is a Research School.