

The journey towards self-regulation (Part 1 of 2)

Part 1

We will:

- Explore the meaning of self-regulation in the early years
- Consider how it relates to child development
- Reflect on the role of the adult in co-regulation

Part 2

We will:

- Focus on how the following can contribute to the journey towards self-regulation:
 - the role of the adult
 - routines
 - environment



Where do we want to get to?

Self-regulation involves children's developing ability to regulate their emotions, thoughts and behaviour to enable them to act in positive ways toward a goal.

Birth-5 Matters

At the end of the EYFS, in the academic year when children turn 5 years old

Personal, Social and Emotional Development

Self-Regulation Early Learning Goal (ELG)

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Show an understanding of their own feelings and those of others, and begin to regulate their behaviour accordingly;
- Set and work towards simple goals, being able to wait for what they want and control their immediate impulses when appropriate;
- Give focused attention to what the teacher says, responding appropriately even when engaged in activity, and show an ability to follow instructions involving several ideas or actions.

Managing Self ELG

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Be confident to try new activities and show independence, resilience and perseverance in the face of challenge;
- Explain the reasons for rules, know right from wrong and try to behave accordingly;

Building Relationships ELG

Children at the expected level of development will:

- Work and play cooperatively and take turns with others;
- Form positive attachments to adults and friendships with peers;
- Show sensitivity to their own and to others' needs.



Personal, Social and Emotional Development

(EYFS Statutory Framework: Educational Programme)

Children's personal, social and emotional development (PSED) is crucial for children to lead healthy and happy lives, and is fundamental to their cognitive development.

Underpinning their personal development are the important attachments that shape their social world. Strong, warm and supportive relationships with adults enable children to learn how to understand their own feelings and those of others.

Children should be supported to manage emotions, develop a positive sense of self, set themselves simple goals, have confidence in their own abilities, to persist and wait for what they want and direct attention as necessary. Through adult modelling and guidance, they will learn how to look after their bodies, including healthy eating, and manage personal needs independently. Through supported interaction with other children, they learn how to make good friendships, co-operate and resolve conflicts peaceably. These attributes will provide a secure platform from which children can achieve at school and in later life.



Ofsted Inspection Handbook: Personal Development

A well-established key person system helps children form secure attachments and promotes their well-being and independence. Practitioners teach children the language of feelings, helping them to appropriately develop their emotional literacy. Relationships between staff and babies are sensitive, stimulating and responsive.



Where do we begin?

Attachment

Babies are vulnerable and totally dependent on others for survival. When they learn that they can depend on and trust one person (usually, but not always, their mother) who is consistently responsive and sensitive to their physical and emotional needs they have what is called a '**secure attachment**'. Research indicates that securely-attached children develop more connections and have well-developed brains. *Social and Emotional Aspects of Development*

- How does attachment relate to the role of the key person?

[Anna Freud - Attachment Booklet - Final.pdf](#)



Co-regulation

Developing self-regulation, like many elements of development and learning, is not something children do by themselves. It is a **process** that grows out of **attuned relationships** where the caregiver and baby or child are closely attentive to each other and engage in **sensitive, responsive exchanges**.

In its earliest stages, co-regulation involves a carer helping a baby who is overwhelmed by feelings- perhaps from being hungry, uncomfortable or unhappy for any reason- to return to a state of calm. Through voice, sensitive handling, and tuning in to respond promptly to a baby's signals, the adult helps the baby experience returning to balance after being in a state of emotional arousal. Each experience of co-regulation helps to build the neural pathways that regulate emotion.

Birth to 5 Matters

[Baby brain development and the foundations of life: Margot's story \(youtube.com\)](#)



Knowing the whole child

key person

Professionals lead with a “public” knowledge of the child understanding broader child development theories, and pedagogical expertise.

Child

primary caregiver

Parents lead with a “personal” knowledge of the child understanding the inner working world of their own child and connecting that to the wider social world.

Neurodiversity, Kerry Murphy



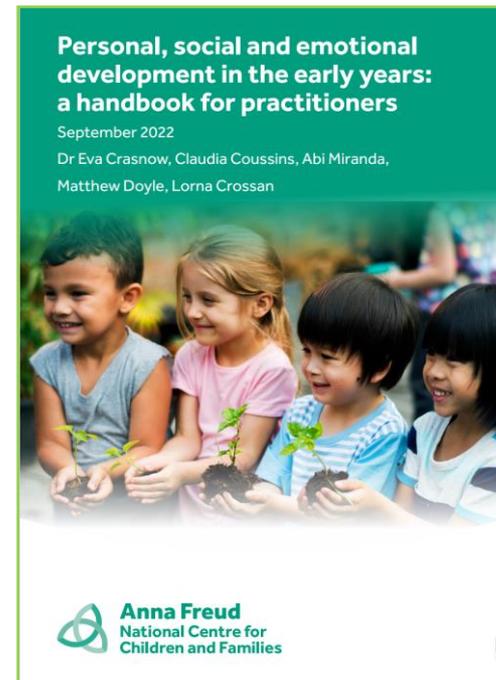
Brains are built

Young children learn about their emotions, and how to manage them, through their relationship with important adults around them.

[Brains are built](#)

[Expert advice and guidance videos for nursery staff | Anna Freud](#)

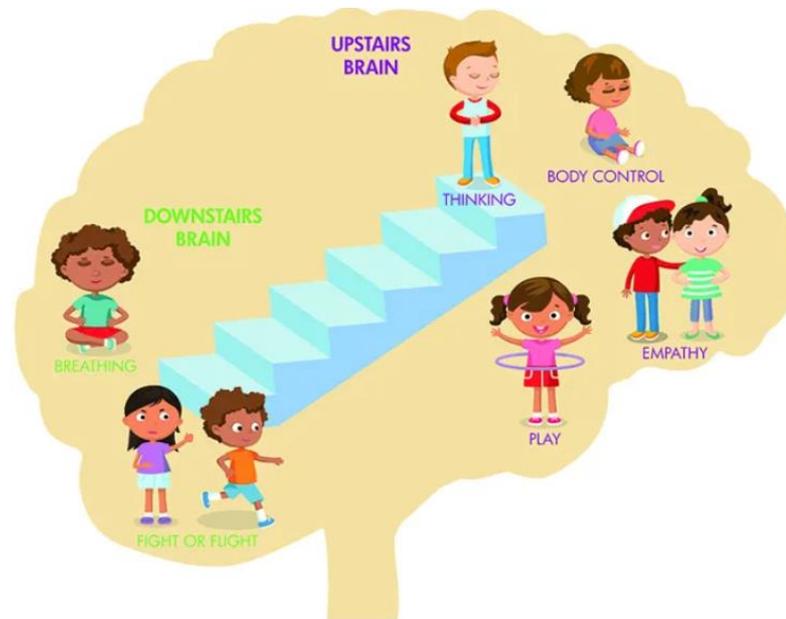
[PSED for early years- a handbook for practitioners](#)



Brain facts

The 'reptilian' part of the brain controls instinctive functions such as breathing and blinking. It is also responsible for the basic survival responses to threat of 'Fright' (frozen in fear), 'Flight' (running away) and 'Fight' (responding aggressively) that occur when a human feels threatened, unsafe or insecure. When the brain is in this mode it is hard to think rationally.

Social and Emotional Aspects of Development



Building an internal teddy bear

Suzanne Zeedyk



Self-regulation depends on and grows out of co-regulation, where adults and children work together. Over time and with consistent practice, the process shifts from co-regulation between adult and child to the child's self-regulation. The flexibility of brain cells and pathways in the early years means that the brain's architecture is altered in response to the quality and consistency of co-regulation experiences, building the capacity for self-regulation.

Birth to 5 Matters



Children will experience big emotions

It is important to let feelings run their course, with our relational support.

Adults might feel overwhelmed by children who appear unhappy and react by distracting them from it, hurrying or jollying them along, as if a child's crying and upset reflects a failure in their skills – *'Don't cry... don't upset yourself... you're ok...there is no need for tears...you don't need to be cross'*. The script might change, but the message to the children is clear: distress is something to be avoided or kept out of sight.

- What does it feel like when your feelings are dismissed?
- What does it feel like when your attempts to process and make sense of difficult experiences are interrupted?



Co-regulation

It is very hard for a small child to:

- manage their feelings
- control their desire to have what they want straight away
- to ignore distractions.

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.

Nursery World, Dr Julian Grenier



Scenario 1

Whimpering, Sonita (aged three) approaches her key person, Kate, who stretches out an arm to her, looks enquiringly and says, 'Sonita, I can see you are upset.' She then pauses as Sonita leans into her arm and explains she has a belly ache. 'You've got a belly ache – your tummy is hurting today. Oh dear,' says Kate, then goes on to add, 'I wonder if you might be missing mummy?' Sonita nods and begins to sob.

'You are missing mummy. Would you like a cuddle while you think about mummy?' asks Kate. Sonita nods and climbs into Kate's lap. Kate holds her close and rubs her back gently then suggests they find the photo of her mummy to look at.

Kate carries Sonita over to her peg to find the photo and waits quietly, her hand on Sonita's back, while Sonita holds on to the peg, still sobbing. After a few moments, Sonita climbs back on Kate's knee. Kate suggests they find a book to share with some friends. After a few moments pause, Sonita nods.



Scenario 1: practitioner response

This type of attuned exchange is described as 'containment' - a helpful word as it suggests something needing to be held to keep it from spilling out everywhere. When a child's unmanageable feelings begin to overflow, the repeated process of 'containment' - in which a trusted adult makes an effort to understand the child and think about what they might be feeling - is hugely comforting. In the case study, Kate:

- 'received' and named Sonita's feelings
- acknowledged Sonita's pain at missing her mummy
- gave Sonita time to express her feelings
- let Sonita know through verbal and non-verbal responses that it is OK for her to have these difficult feelings and that Kate is able to empathise and help her manage them (co-regulation)
- gave Sonita an implicit message that the bad feeling will eventually pass and good feelings will come again - as they enjoy a book together.



Scenario 2: practitioner point of view

- A child has suddenly lashed out and hit another child who was happily playing... and then run off. I didn't see what led up to it. But I saw the total collapse in trust all over the 'hit' child's face, how hurt they were and I went over to soothe them. Eventually the hit child told me they wanted to let the other child know how they were feeling.
- I went to speak to the child who had hit, but I was met by total non-engagement – I think because I started by saying (with my facial and body language as much as anything) "there's a big problem with what you just did". Their resistance grew and soon they were calling me and the other child names.
- In the end, activated by my total empathy in that moment for the child who'd been hit, and real lack of it for the one who'd hit, I said something shaming of the hitting child to the other, in everyone's earshot, like "I'm really sorry that he can't hear what you've got to say".



Scenario 2: practitioner reflection

Educators may not always feel that they have supported children in the most optimal way, however, reflecting on what might have gone wrong is helpful. It is important to be kind to ourselves and others. We will not always get it right.

The educator recognised that they were emotionally triggered by the situation, which got in the way of a positive resolution.

- It is important to make expressing distressed emotions safe: 'I really need you to stop hitting', attend to the hurt child, but then to acknowledge the natural feelings and energy in the other child, when they are ready: 'It looked like you were feeling really frustrated just then?' or 'I wonder how you're feeling?'
- It needs ample time and space before you can try to help a child see what was not okay. Otherwise, the risk is falling into a shaming loop which only pushes the conflict down the line – often amplified – into another space/interaction.
- Perhaps at calmer points we can take opportunities to use books, puppets or small world resources to play out conflict or discuss difficult emotions.

Support strategies

Receive and name the feeling

What are they 'telling' me?

- Recognise the child's behaviour as communication
- Look and listen for physical and verbal signs of emotions

What can I do to help/co-regulate?

- Name the feeling

"I can see you're really worried, you're frowning and biting your fingers"

"I think you might be feeling angry, you look hot and you're clenching your fists."



Acknowledge that it is real

What are they telling me?

- Try and see things from the child's point of view
- "Oh dear"
- "Poor you"
- "I feel sad when I miss my friend too"

How can I help/co-regulate?

- Offer a cuddle
- Stroke, rock them gently
- Wipe their tears
- Stay close by



When children become overwhelmed, it is not necessary to 'fix' the distress. Educators can sit with the child and just listen and (often with non-verbal sounds) provide empathy, love and support.

Support strategies

Take some time

- Give the child a safe space to express their feelings.
- Remember it's okay to not be okay.
- Emotions are natural and normal.
- We can't always choose the way we feel.
- Spend some time together....don't rush on.
- Help children to know that this will pass.



Model strategies

- Breathing exercises – balloon breath, finger breathing
- Squeezing a toy
- Spending time in a quiet cosy corner
- Jumping or other rhythmical play
- Exploring emotions through books, small world or role play

Take a Deep Breath

Smell the flower



Blow the pinwheel



The adult as play partner and co-regulator

Child-led play, supported by attentive adults, is where children learn the skills needed.

Babies and toddlers: Amazing learners - Video 3

See: 5 minutes 14 – 5 minutes 58

EEF | Early Mathematics (educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)

Click on: 4. Teaching and modelling how to make comparisons and connections
Scroll to the bottom of the page: Connecting Shapes

sirenfilms.co.uk/library/adam-and-the-trampoline/

EEF | Self-Regulation and Executive Function (educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)

Click on: 3. Creating a community of collaborative learners
Scroll to the bottom of the page: But that wouldn't be fair

I'm angry! I'm sad. — Siren Films

Observing Practice Series NQS PLP - They won't let me play - YouTube



Task

1. Consider scenarios 1 & 2 and the adult role.
Are they familiar experiences?
2. Reflect as a team/room team on the four support strategies.
What will these look like at different stages of development?
 - Receive and name the feeling
 - Acknowledge that it is real
 - Take some time
 - Model strategies
3. *Which support strategy is an area of strength for you?*
Which strategy would you like to revisit or explore further?

