

# Promoting young children's self-regulation skills through play (three- to five-year-olds)



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## About Partnership for Children

Partnership for Children was set up in 2001 as a charity. Our aim is to promote the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children, helping them to develop social and communication skills, coping strategies, emotional resilience and self-confidence. We do this by providing teachers, early years practitioners, parents and carers with skills and resources. We have a suite of evidence-based Skills for Life programmes which help young children to cope with difficulties and express their feelings, improve the classroom atmosphere, boost academic achievement and reduce bullying. We work across the UK and internationally with our partners. Since we were established, we have benefited more than two and a half million children.

Visit [our website](#) for more information on our school-based programmes and free downloadable resources.

## About Anna Freud

[Anna Freud](#) has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care for over 70 years. Our aim is to close the gap in wellbeing and mental health by delivering and sharing the best practice with everyone who impacts the lives of children and families. We believe that every child and their family should be at the heart of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals.

Early Years in Mind is a free online network run by Anna Freud for early years practitioners. The network provides easy to read and easy to use guidance on supporting the mental health and wellbeing of babies, young children and their families. The network was developed by mental health experts and shares practical and clinical expertise, and advice on using attachment-informed practice. Our resources are co-designed with sector experts and those with lived experience. Visit our [website](#) for more details about our free Early Years in Mind network and resources.





# Introduction to this guide

Self-regulation empowers children to manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours in ways that pave the path for positive social interactions, academic success, and overall wellbeing. Self-regulation is not only a personal asset for children but a crucial tool for navigating the complexities of the world. The ongoing challenges we are all facing since the pandemic, including a cost-of-living crisis, brings with them stressors that can impact every member of a household, including young children.

In this guide, we will explore the concept of self-regulation and its importance in the early years. We will explain: the science behind self-regulation within the context of key developmental milestones for children in this age range; how to develop strategies and techniques for promoting self-regulation and the vital role that adult-led play can have in modelling and guiding self-regulatory skills (with example activities).

Whether you're a parent or carer seeking to create a nurturing home environment, an Early Years Practitioner aiming to create a supportive classroom atmosphere, or someone in the community involved in the care of young children, this guide is for you. It is designed to offer you practical strategies and activities to support the development of young children's self-regulation so that they can thrive.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework includes Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) as one of the three prime areas of learning and development in the EYFS. Self-regulation strategies are one part of PSED. Please refer to Anna Freud's PSED handbook for practitioners and [What to expect in the EYFS](#) for further support in this area.



## SECTION 1: What is self-regulation and why is it important?

Self-regulation involves children developing the ability to regulate their emotions, thoughts and behaviour to enable them to act in positive ways toward a goal.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of self-regulation encompasses the following:

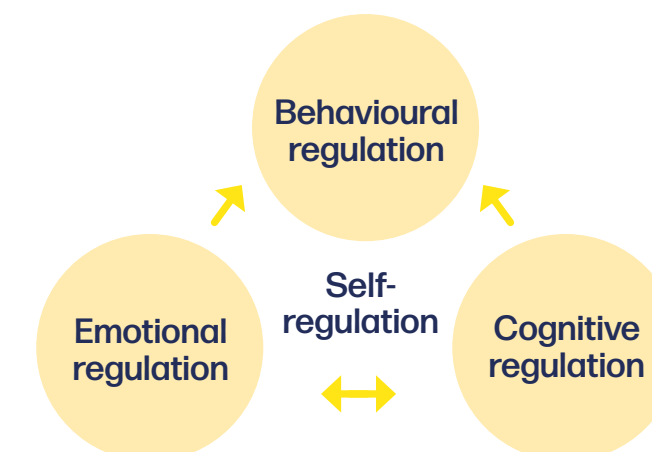
**Emotional self-regulation:** includes a child's ability to identify, label and communicate their feelings as well as understanding and managing their emotional responses.

**Cognitive self-regulation:** includes a child's impulse control, such as waiting their turn and following instructions to stop, sustaining attention, and ignoring distractions, problem-solving, working memory and decision making.

Both emotional and cognitive self-regulation are needed for **behavioural regulation**. When a child is calm and their feelings are balanced, they are able to engage their cognitive skills to make decisions about what behaviour is needed. However, strong emotions can impact cognitive self-regulation, and emotions such as anger or fear can prevent children being able to control their impulses or sustain attention.

When a child is upset, we need to support them through **emotional co-regulation** - which means working together with the child to manage their emotions and think about the situation. As children develop their cognitive self-regulation skills, they will be able to start monitoring their own feelings and decide on coping strategies to calm themselves. **Self-regulation is not** the same thing as compliance or ensuring they conform, such as sitting still and listening when expected to. Instead, it focuses on nurturing their

ability to understand, express, and manage their feelings and actions independently. This empowers them to make decisions based on their understanding of the situation rather than acting due to external pressures. Calm and alert children are balanced in their feelings, thinking and behaviour. An anxious and stressed child can react with a 'freeze' response, becoming withdrawn, physically still and unable to respond to questions. This is not a self-regulated child. It's important to remember self-regulation is not fixed and it will fluctuate day to day as it does in adults.



## Why is self-regulation important?

Self-regulation is a vital skill for three to five year olds to develop, as it not only shapes their immediate experiences but also lays the groundwork for their future emotional intelligence, academic success, and positive social interactions. Providing support and guidance to help children build these essential skills during the early years can have a lasting and positive impact on their overall development and wellbeing. This is especially important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds who are more likely to begin early years education with weaker self-regulation skills.<sup>2</sup>

Children with effective self-regulation skills are:

- More focused and attentive, making it easier for them to participate in learning activities and absorb new information. Early research has shown that self-regulation strategies have a positive impact (+ three months) on children's early literacy and numeracy skills.<sup>3</sup>
- Children with well-developed self-regulation skills are less likely to exhibit challenging behaviours or engage in impulsive actions, leading to smoother interactions with caregivers, teachers, and peers.
- Self-regulation helps young children understand and manage their emotions. It allows them to express their feelings appropriately, cope with challenging emotions like frustration and anger, and develop a sense of emotional resilience.
- Children with good self-regulation are better equipped to navigate social interactions. They can take turns, share, and cooperate with others more effectively, which are essential skills for forming positive relationships with peers and adults.

## The role of secure attachment in self-regulation

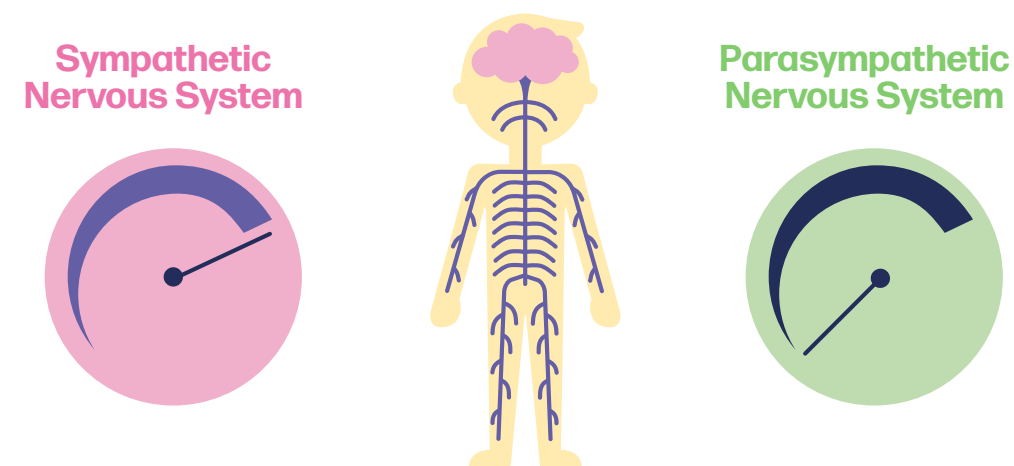
Self-regulation skills are deeply intertwined with the quality of the child-caregiver relationships. The connections children form with their parents, caregivers, and teachers serve as the foundation upon which self-regulation abilities are built. Research has shown that secure and nurturing relationships provide a safe haven from which children can explore their emotions, learn coping mechanisms, and develop the confidence to manage their reactions to challenges. The Polyvagal Theory explains how people use what's known as the "social engagement system" to feel safe when they feel threatened.

Most importantly, securely attached children can turn to their caregiver for comfort or support when they are distressed. When they have this trusted figure in their life they can learn how to manage and regulate their emotions effectively. We will explore techniques for building secure attachments through play at the end of this guide. More information on Attachment in Early Years can be found [here](#).

## SECTION 2: The theory and early years milestones

The autonomic nervous system (ANS) plays a crucial role in the development of self-regulation in young children.

### Autonomic Nervous System (ANS)



The ANS regulates involuntary physiological processes, such as heart rate, digestion, respiration, and stress responses. It consists of two branches: the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS).

The ANS is influenced by external factors such as children's environment, relationships and experiences. Caregivers can support children in learning how to shift from a heightened SNS state to a calmer PNS state more efficiently by teaching relaxation techniques, modelling emotional regulation, and creating safe spaces for emotional expression.

Relaxation techniques might include movement, rhythmic activities, dancing, playing or listening to music which might help to regulate a child.

#### The Sympathetic Nervous System

It becomes activated in response to a real or perceived threat or stressor, often known as the "fight or flight" response. It prepares the body to respond to danger.

In young children the SNS is sensitive and can often result in strong emotional reactions.

#### The Parasympathetic Nervous System

This system counterbalances the effects of the SNS, helping to return the body to a state of balance after a stress response.

Children are gradually learning how to activate the PNS so they can calm down after a stress response.





## Neurodiverse children and self-regulation

When considering neurodiversity in young children and its relationship to self-regulation, it's important to acknowledge that each child's journey is unique and that their neurodivergent traits can play a significant role in their self-regulation development. Some neurodivergent children might excel in certain aspects of self-regulation, such as focusing intensely on activities they enjoy, while facing challenges in areas like transitioning between tasks. The following are some key areas to consider:

- **Sensory processing:** many neurodiverse children experience sensory sensitivities or differences in sensory processing. This can significantly impact their emotional responses and self-regulation. For example, children might become overwhelmed by sensory stimuli, leading to meltdowns.
- **Coping strategies:** neurodivergent children often develop unique coping strategies such as using stimming (repetitive movements or sounds) to self-soothe, while others might need structured routines to feel secure.
- **Emotional intensity:** neurodivergent children might experience emotions intensely, which can influence their self-regulation.

Neurodivergent children can be helped by giving them sensory-friendly spaces; respecting their individual communication styles; and acknowledging different ways of processing emotions. Creating a nurturing atmosphere can allow neurodivergent children to develop effective self-regulation skills. Please refer to Anna Freud's ['A guide to neurodiversity in the early years'](#) for ideas to support with practical approaches to becoming neurodiversity-informed within our early years practice.



## Early years milestones and self-regulation

It's important to remember that self-regulation is not a skill to be mastered by a particular age; research shows that adults continue to develop the ability to self-regulate in line with prefrontal cortex development. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functions like impulse control, attention regulation, and decision-making, is still developing well into adolescence.<sup>4</sup>

However, by the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (aged five) 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.

## Co-regulation between child and parent or caregiver

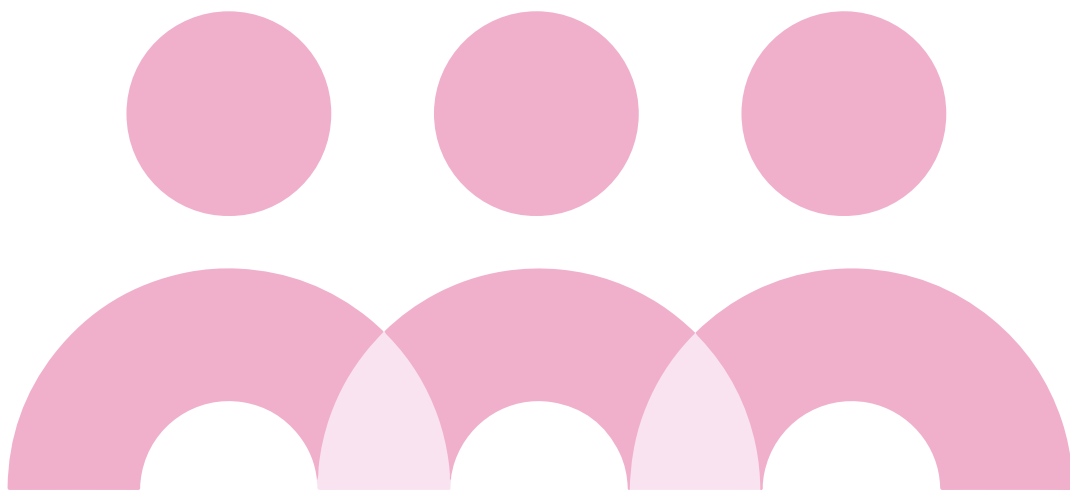
Co-regulation is a process where adults and children influence each other's emotional and physiological states, both positively and negatively. When children are happy and excited, parents are more likely to positively engage with them, making both the adult and child happier. However, children are highly sensitive to parents' emotional cues and if parents are stressed, anxious or angry, this will negatively influence children's emotional and physiological states. In turn, children may show distress and their behaviour can then heighten parental stress, creating a negative loop of unhelpful co-regulation.

When children are stressed or faced with a threat, they turn to their trusted adult for support; this is known in Polyvagal Theory as social engagement. The role of the adult is to engage with them, stay calm and help soothe them. If over time their trusted adult does not provide this support, this is when children will move straight into a fight or flight response.

In order to be the trusted adults our children need, we need to be able to regulate our own emotional and physiological response to stress. Consider the following questions:

- What triggers my stress response?
- How do I know when I am feeling stressed?
- How can I show children calm and regulated behaviour when I am feeling stressed?

Positive co-regulation involves a parent or caregiver actively supporting and regulating the child's emotional and physiological responses to stress by providing reassurance and comfort, which promotes a sense of security and safety in children. This is a crucial process which shapes children's future self-regulation and social interaction skills. Learning techniques to regulate your own emotional responses will allow you to positively co-regulate with your child and provide them with social engagement as a trusted adult.



## SECTION 3: Activities for promoting self-regulation through play

*"Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul" - Froebel*

Play is a necessity for supporting children's self-regulation. Both adult-led and child-led play provides children with a natural and enjoyable context in which they can learn to manage their impulses, make decisions, and navigate social interactions.

### Supporting child-led play

In child-led play, the child takes the initiative and control of the play. They choose the activity, set the pace, and determine the direction of play. Allow for at least an hour of unstructured play for children per day which does not involve technology. Provide a variety of objects that can spark their imagination from your existing collection of toys/books/art materials. If these are limited consider where children can freely access these resources e.g. library, another room in the nursery for older children, natural objects collected from outside, scrap paper or fabric, empty containers, kitchen utensils.

Although minimal interruptions are ideal, you can support children in their play with open ended questions that inspire them.

*"What do you think would happen if...?"*

*"Can you tell me a story about...?"*

*"What else do you think you need to...?"*

It is also helpful to reflect on emotions after play, encourage children to talk about what made them happy, excited, frustrated in their play and what they might do next time.

### Adult-led play

Adult-led play is directed and organised by adults, such as parents, teachers, or caregivers. Adults plan and guide the play activities designed to meet specific goals.





Here are a selection of short play-based activities to enjoy taking part in with your children. They cover 6 key themes to support emotional regulation:

### 1. The environment

A child's environment is important because it influences their ability to self-regulate. A calming area provides children with a designated space where they can learn to regulate their emotions. It offers a safe and structured environment for them to process and manage their feelings effectively. Giving children the option to go to the calm down corner empowers them to make choices about their emotional wellbeing. This promotes a sense of autonomy and control over their feelings.

*Activity: Calming Corner Challenge*

- Create a 'calming corner' together, a dedicated space in the setting/home where children can practice their self-regulation techniques.
- Support children to collect or make the items needed for the corner e.g. cushions, favourite teddy, books.
- Explain to your child the purpose of the calming corner. Let them know it's a place where they can go when they're feeling overwhelmed or upset.
- Establish clear rules for using the calming corner, such as respecting quiet time and not using it as a punishment. Make sure your child knows they can go there voluntarily.



#### Reflection questions

What other small things can you change about your environment to support children with their self-regulation?

Have you asked your children which places make them feel safe and calm and or stressed and worried?

What other meaningful choices can you give to children in daily routines to promote decision making and autonomy such as what to wear, what to eat, which activity to take part in?



### 2. Mindful listening

By listening attentively to sounds in our environment, we become more grounded in the present, which helps us manage overwhelming emotions. Engaging with sounds, such as listening to music or focusing on the sounds of nature, can divert our attention away from stressors, allowing us to regain emotional control.

*Activity: Mindful Listening Master*

- Ask the children if they would like to join you in learning to be a mindful listening master.
- Tell the children you are going to play a game to see who can stay quiet and hear the most sounds in one minute.
- Ask the children to share the sounds they heard and how the sounds make them feel. The sounds could be loud sounds like sirens or quiet sounds like the hum of a fridge.
- Practice this game in different places with different sounds, each time finding ways to listen more mindfully e.g. taking slow breaths, closing our eyes, staying still.
- You could make a mindful listening certificate for each 20 sounds children hear.



#### Reflection questions

What other senses can you encourage children to use?

In a challenging moment, could asking children for one thing they can hear and one thing they can see help them to calm down?

How often do you provide positive reinforcement to encourage children to practise mindful listening?





### 3. Physical activity

Being physically active helps children to manage their physical energy which impacts their emotional responses. When children are physically healthy, their wellbeing improves which allows them to be able to handle challenges more effectively. Playful yoga for example promotes body awareness, focus and concentration which all support self-regulation.

*Activity: Playful Yoga*

- Find a space children have room to stretch and move around preferably with a soft floor.
- Make up yoga movements, positions and stretches that correspond to different emotions.
- Ask children to create the stretches themselves.
- “Show me a pose that makes you feel happy” e.g. arms up looking to the sky.
- “What could a sad yoga stretch look like?” e.g. head down and arms wrapped around legs.
- Once you have agreed on a small number of poses, make up a short story that involves different emotions e.g. one morning Sally woke up feeling like a grumpy...
- Each time you say an emotion children should move into the corresponding pose



#### Reflection questions

What other games could you play that challenge children to control their physical movements? E.g. dancing games or obstacle courses.

Could you incorporate stretching into daily morning or evening routines?

How can you model using physical activity to manage your own emotions?



### 4. Problem-solving

Problem-solving is important for self-regulation because it encourages children to be flexible and open to different solutions. It teaches them that there can be multiple ways to approach a problem, which is a valuable skill for adapting to various situations and regulating their responses accordingly. It also supports with perseverance and managing frustration when encountering setbacks.

*Activity: Treasure Hunt*

- Collect a few toys or stickers to be the ‘treasure’ and hide them in different areas around the room or outside area.
- Draw a simple map with landmarks the children will recognise e.g. sofa or tree and a star with where the treasure is hidden.
- Encourage the children to follow the trail on the map to find the hidden treasure.
- You can ask them questions along the way to support their problem-solving skills.
- “If we can’t see the treasure straight away, what might we need to do to find it?”
- “What can you see on the map that can help us find the treasure?”



#### Reflection questions

How can you challenge children’s problem-solving skills in real-life situations?

How can you support children to approach everyday activities in different ways? E.g. their method for getting dressed or doing a puzzle?





## 5. Story telling

Stories are important for self-regulation because they allow children to connect and relate to the characters' feelings. This can support empathy and provides opportunities for children to recognise their own emotions. Stories also build children's emotional vocabulary which allows them to communicate their emotions more effectively. This is known as 'emotional literacy' and is essential for self-regulation.

### Activity: Storytime

- Choose an age-appropriate book which explores different emotions. If you don't have any books, try your local library or find read aloud books free to access online.
- Support interactive reading of the story by asking children questions about the characters and story and what might happen next.
- Allow time for reflection on the characters' emotions and why the characters may be acting in a certain way or taking particular decisions.
- Connect the story to real life situations the children may have experienced.
- After the story, ask the children about alternative endings or inventing the next part of the story.



### Reflection questions

How do you reduce other distractions during story time?

Can you create a visual timetable with children so they can see when story time is coming each day to support predictability and routine?



## 6. Working memory

Using their working memory allows children to retain information while performing a task, helping them to sustain attention. It also allows them to remain regulated because they can organise their thoughts and create plans to achieve their intended goals.

### Activity: Memory Match

- Cut up a piece of paper or card into 6 squares and create a set of cards with colourful images drawn on each card e.g. pink circle, green star. Create pairs of identical cards (e.g. 2 pink circles).
- Place the cards face down on a flat surface and demonstrate turning two cards over to see if they match. Ask your child/children to take turns in choosing two cards to turn over. If they match they can keep them. If they don't match they turn them back over.
- Emphasise the importance of remembering what the pictures on the cards were and where they are.
- Celebrate their success in finding matching pairs and gradually increase the number of cards.



### Reflection questions

What questions can you ask children to use their memory recall? E.g. do you remember where you saw the pink circles?

How often do you narrate daily tasks and the steps involved in the process to help children hold and process information? E.g. when getting dressed.

More examples of play-based activities are available on the [Partnership for Children's website](#).



# SECTION 4: Additional resources

If you are interested in learning more, these resources may also be useful.

[Resource 1: Teacher Handbook on Self-Regulation in the Early years](#)

[Resource 2: Self Regulation Strategies](#)

[Resource 3: The Emotion Regulation in Children \(ERiC\) study](#)

## Footnotes

[1] Birth To 5 Matters – Guidance by the sector, for the sector. (n.d.). <https://birthto5matters.org.uk/>

[2] Percipio Global Ltd. (2023, April 26). Self-regulation strategies. EEF. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/early-years-toolkit/self-regulation-strategies>

[3] Percipio Global Ltd. (2024, January 2). Early years toolkit. EEF. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/early-years-toolkit>

[4] Ochsner, K. N., & Gross, J. J. (2008). Cognitive emotion regulation. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 17(2), 153–158. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2008.00566.x>