



## Supporting self-regulation

### What is self-regulation and why is it important for kindergarten children?

Self-regulation is the ability to manage emotions, thoughts, and behaviours to respond to different situations effectively. Intentionally supporting children to develop self-regulation strategies helps them become more flexible, navigate strong emotions and make thoughtful choices. These skills are evident when children follow instructions, build positive relationships, stay focused on tasks, and successfully cope with frustration. As children grow, they become increasingly capable of coping with change, from small adjustments in daily routines to major life events, such as transitioning to school. Supporting children to develop self-regulation in the early years lays a strong foundation for learning and long-term success. Research shows that well-developed self-regulation by age four is linked to stronger academic achievement by age seven, particularly in mathematics and reading (Howard et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2013).

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### Self-regulation in the Queensland kindergarten learning guideline

Educators can support self-regulation through empathic, responsive interactions with children and by using intentional teaching practices. This section explores how emotional self-regulation relates to each of the *Queensland kindergarten learning guideline* (QKLG) learning and development areas.

#### Identity

Every child has a unique personality shaped by diverse cultural, social, and environmental experiences. By nurturing each child's strengths, educators help them build secure and trusting relationships and develop social confidence. Informed by the QKLG principle — high expectations, equity and respect for diversity — a responsive and individualised approach does not label behaviours as 'normal' or 'good'. Instead, it supports children to develop the skills to self-regulate while fostering self-awareness, increasing independence and appreciating diversity. These skills are especially important during daily routines and transitions, when children are required to shift their attention, manage emotions, and return to a calm, focused state (Vasseleu et al., 2023).

#### Connectedness

Promoting emotional intelligence and self-regulation involves supporting children's positive relationships and strengthening their social skills. These capabilities enable children to stay focused, remain calm, navigate social expectations, engage meaningfully with others, make

friends, and learn to share and take turns during games and conversations. From a social-emotional perspective, children begin to recognise other people's feelings and preferences, and become more willing to accommodate different needs, as they start valuing healthy relationships. As a result, they develop deeper pro-social behaviours and empathy, while also learning to manage and express their emotions (Wigfield, 2023). Ultimately, self-regulation supports children balance their own needs with those of others.

## Wellbeing

Self-regulation skills are linked to healthy energy levels and have been associated with increased levels of 'feel good' hormones, such as serotonin, and reduced levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol (Center on the Developing Child, 2019). Elevated stress hormones can impair a child's ability to concentrate, manage conflict, solve problems, and take on new challenges (Center on the Developing Child, 2021). Supportive relationships with family, educators, and peers play a protective role.

## Active learning

Through active learning, kindergarten children become increasingly capable of managing multiple tasks, such as following scaffolded guidelines to guide their behaviour and responses. Self-regulated learning, supported by intentional teaching strategies, empowers children to take charge of their learning on an emotional, behavioural, and motivational level, while also strengthening their critical thinking skills. This process activates key executive functioning skills, including inhibition (e.g. waiting for their turn in a game), working memory (e.g. remembering and applying a set of instructions to play a game), and cognitive flexibility (e.g. the ability to switch between thoughts) (Savina, 2020).

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## Communicating

The ability to recognise, understand, and monitor thoughts and feelings can help children manage both their behavioural and verbal expressions. Educators play an important role by helping children organise their thoughts to communicate their feelings and ideas more effectively. For instance, educators can encourage children to take turns during conversations, focus their attention on tasks, and actively engage in experiences by following instructions. These strategies not only support emotional expression but also help children build vocabulary and strengthen interpersonal skills across a range of contexts.

Through play-based language, literacy and numeracy experiences, educators can maximise opportunities for:

- communication capabilities — children build their verbal and non-verbal communication skills to express ideas, feelings, and solutions. These interactions help them connect with others respectfully, expand their vocabulary, and develop essential life skills
- purposeful and sustained interactions — as children learn to understand and regulate their emotional responses, they gain confidence to make context-appropriate choices, navigate and resolve conflicts, express their feelings and recognise the perspectives and needs of others.

## Strategies to support and enhance self-regulation

When working with children aged three to five years, providing opportunities for collaborative goal setting, problem solving, and decision-making can enhance self-regulation skills. These experiences help children better understand their emotions and apply self-regulation strategies in meaningful ways (Vasseleu et al., 2024). The QKLG principles, practices and learning and development areas underpin intentional strategies such as:

- **providing choices** — offering children choices empowers them and provides opportunities to practise thinking about options (Neville et al., 2013). Even when a suggestion is not possible, such as when it poses a safety concern, educators can still validate the child's thinking. Starting with 'no' may lead to a power struggle, which can often be avoided by acknowledging the idea and guiding the child to consider consequences. For instance: 'That's an interesting idea! But what do you think might happen if we did that? Can you tell me why that might not be safe?'
- **setting clear expectations and routines** — consistent routines and clear communication help children feel secure and in control. This can reduce stress (BeYou, 2024). Involving children in setting expectations, especially when discussing risk and safety, supports their understanding of appropriate behaviours in context and fosters a sense of shared responsibility. Educators can explain the reasons behind the expectations with open-ended questions such as: 'Why do we need to clean up after we've played?' It is also important to keep the planning for daily learning experiences realistic, as over-scheduling can leave children feeling rushed, tired, and stressed (BeYou, 2024)
- **developing metacognitive skills** — metacognition, thinking about how we learn, is a vital reflective skill that requires modelling and opportunities to practise. For instance, learning to manage distractions is critical for maintaining focus. Educators can support this by helping children identify real-life distractions and explore strategies to manage them. Children can also be guided to actively monitor their own thinking by
  - using positive self-talk
  - pausing and checking
  - asking for help
  - using visual cues
  - re-telling content and summarising in their own words
  - making choices as they engage in learning experiences (Westwood, 2004)
- **integrating movement and play** — games such as hide and seek, head-shoulders-knees-toes, musical chairs, dance freeze, and Simon says promote self-regulation skills in a fun and engaging way. These activities encourage children to move their bodies, breathe deeply, and practise inhibitory control. Rhythmic and movement-based group activities can also help develop motor coordination, auditory processing, and self-regulatory skills (Williams, 2018; Williams et al., 2020).

## Responding to children experiencing sensory overload

Sensory overload occurs when a child's senses are overwhelmed by too much information at once, often accompanied by intense emotional responses — whether positive or negative. In these moments children may find it difficult to process language or respond verbally.

During such situations, alternative communication methods and modelling supportive strategies can be more effective, such as:

- reassuring children that big feelings are valid
- providing calm and quiet spaces within the environment to give children a safe place to retreat, regulate and feel secure
- offering choices to support calming and refocusing, such as listening to relaxing music, looking through a favourite book or family photo album, or using a fidget toy or string of beads, can help children regain a sense of control and emotional balance.

## Conclusion

Supporting self-regulation in kindergarten is essential for children's emotional, social, and academic development. By incorporating intentional teaching practices, encouraging reflective thinking, and creating supportive environments, educators can empower children to recognise and manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours effectively. Strategies such as establishing predictable routines, providing meaningful choices, and engaging children in play-based learning experiences foster resilience, adaptability, and a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

## Points for reflection

- How can I monitor and interpret children's progress in their self-regulation skills?
- How do I identify and reduce stressors in the learning environment?
- How can I work with families to implement approaches to support resilience and adaptability to manage transitions?

## Kindergarten research insights contributors



**Susanne Garvis** is a professor of early childhood education at the Griffith Institute for Educational Research. Susanne has lived and worked at universities in Australia, Norway and Sweden. Her research focuses on improving policy, and quality and learning with young children from birth to age five. Susanne is a mixed methods researcher who has worked with various governments, NGOs and professional organisations in Australia and around the world.



**Marghi Ghezzi** is a qualified teacher, published author, and now initial teacher education academic. Marghi has been working across education sectors for over 25 years. She is currently a PhD candidate at Griffith University under the supervision of Professor Susanne Garvis and Professor Donna Pendergast, and A/P Eric Pakulak (based in Stockholm University, Sweden). Her research focuses on self-regulation in the early years. More precisely, it is a multi-method feasibility study and cultural adaptation of a two generation, neuroplasticity-informed program for children aged 3–6.



**Parian Madanipour** is a doctoral candidate in the School of Education and Professional Studies at Griffith University, and an academic at the Melbourne Graduate School of Education. Throughout her career, Parian has worked extensively in research and teaching. Her doctoral studies explore how early childhood teachers facilitate the development of executive functions in everyday preschool settings, offering insights that bridge theoretical frameworks with practical applications.

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