



A Froebelian approach

Nurturing self-regulation

by Dr Lynn J. McNair OBE
and Carol Cerdan

Contents



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Froebelian principles

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) was the inventor of kindergartens and a pioneer of early childhood education and care. Froebel's work and writing changed the way we think about and value early childhood.

Froebel's ideas were considered revolutionary in the 1850s. The principles of his work continue to challenge and be relevant to modern mainstream early years educational practice.

Unity and connectedness

Everything in the universe is connected. The more one is aware of this unity, the deeper the understanding of oneself, others, nature and the wider world. Children are whole beings whose thoughts, feelings and actions are interrelated. Young children learn in a holistic way and learning should never be compartmentalised for everything links.

Autonomous learners

Each child is unique and what children can do rather than what they cannot, is the starting point for a child's learning. Children learn best by doing things for themselves and from becoming more aware of their own learning. Froebelian educators respect children for who they are and value them for their efforts. Helping children to reflect is a key feature of a Froebelian education.

The value of childhood in its own right

Childhood is not merely a preparation for the next stage in learning. Learning begins at birth and continues throughout life.

Relationships matter

The relationships of every child with themselves, their parents, carers, family and wider community are valued. Relationships are of central importance in a child's life.

Creativity and the power of symbols

Creativity is about children representing their own ideas in their own way, supported by a nurturing environment and people. As children begin to use and make symbols they express their inner thoughts and ideas and make meaning. Over time, literal reflections of everyday life, community and culture become more abstract and nuanced.

The central importance of play

Play is part of being human and helps children to relate their inner worlds of feelings, ideas and lived experiences taking them to new levels of thinking, feeling, imagining and creating and is a resource for the future. Children have ownership of their play. Froebelian education values the contribution of adults offering ‘freedom with guidance’ to enrich play as a learning context.

Engaging with nature

Experience and understanding of nature and our place in it, is an essential aspect of Froebelian practice. Through real life experiences, children learn about the interrelationship of all living things. This helps them to think about the bigger questions of the environment, sustainability and climate change.

Knowledgeable and nurturing educators

Early childhood educators who engage in their own learning and believe in principled and reflective practice are a key aspect of a Froebelian approach. Froebelian educators facilitate and guide, rather than instruct. They provide rich real life experiences and observe children carefully, supporting and extending their interests through ‘freedom with guidance’.

Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early childhood education at froebel.org.uk



Introduction

Cultivating emotional harmony

In this pamphlet, children's behaviour is explored through a Froebelian lens.

Froebel invited us as educators to think about the reasons behind a child's actions; to consider how you respond to difficult situations where emotions are running high; and to analyse how your own emotional impulses can influence your responses to a child's behaviour.

The pamphlet looks at what motivates children's behaviour and suggests how educators can support each child to self-regulate.

It includes real-life examples to illustrate how educators can create inclusive environments in which children are helped to understand, articulate and regulate their emotions.



Fig. 1: Creating an inclusive environment

“We find a freshness and richness in the life of the child who has been rightly guided and cared for in his early years. Is there any part of a person's thought and feeling, knowledge and ability, which does not have its deepest roots in childhood, and any aspect of his future education which does not originate there?”

Froebel in Lilley 1967: 87

A democratic approach

When educators adopt a Froebelian approach, they do not control children with rule-based behaviour management strategies which reflect an imbalance of power between educators and children.

Froebel's approach was different: he encouraged educators to assess and understand 'the act' from the child's point of view and to help children understand how their behaviours affect other people. In today's society, we might call this approach democratic and humanistic.



Fig. 2: Understanding 'the act' from the child's perspective

“Under each human fault lies a good tendency which has been crushed, misunderstood or misled. ...bring to light this original good tendency and... nourish, foster and train it.”

Froebel in Bruce 2021: 29

“The child has the human need to please and to give. He feels already that he is a part of the whole world and belongs to the whole of Nature, and he wants to be recognised and treated as such.”

Froebel in Lilley 1967: 38

Enabling children to be their best selves

Bruce (2021) explains that Froebel emphasised the importance of guidance rather than control with young children. A guidance approach views the educator as an enabler who trusts children to make appropriate choices when given the autonomy and support to do so.

For this to happen, it is important to reflect on the ways that adults' power reduces or enables children's capacity to make choices and take part in decision-making.

Froebel believed children were motivated to be their best selves. His thoughts on children's behaviour were greatly influenced by his own sometimes adverse childhood experiences.



Fig. 3: The child is part of the whole world

“The controlling approach is so widely endorsed in so many cultures that it can appear to be 'common sense'.”

Porter 2008: 18

The whole child

As adults, we understand that our behaviour is determined by what is happening in our lives – our relationships, work and mood are all connected.

For the child it is no different but this can, at times, be overlooked. For example, the child's 'behaviour' may be viewed in isolation, without consideration of the context of what is happening in the child's life at that moment in time.

It's always an advantage when educators know what is going on in a child's wider world so they can try to understand the choices made by children, and support them to express their emotions through dialogue.

Educators need to be sensitively attuned to children and notice changes, as information might not always be provided.

There might be multi-layered reasons for a child acting in a certain way and it can be difficult to unpick. They may be asserting their autonomy or trying out where boundaries lie.

When educators really observe closely and reflect on all the evidence they are given, they are more likely to understand why certain behaviours are emerging.

Froebel's notion of 'the whole child' encompasses the idea of unity in which, "all aspects of a child's life – thoughts, feelings, actions, and relationships – are interrelated."

Tovey 2020: 6



Fig. 4: Educators need to be sensitively attuned to children

Children's worlds

“Froebel found that parents deeply appreciated practitioners who became a bridge between the family and the community and wider world.”

Bruce 2012: 20

Practice example

Lisa was screaming at some children and refusing to play with anyone. Louise (educator) found Lisa sobbing, and saying that she wanted to be home with her mummy. Coupled with Lisa's earlier behaviour, this was out of character. Louise later contacted the family and discovered that Lisa's mum had recently been diagnosed with a debilitating illness. The symptoms of the illness and upset of the discovery had caused great stress for the parents, impacting on relations with their child.

In this example, Lisa's distress was obvious, but emotional turmoil might not always be visible. Children vary tremendously in how they express their emotional experiences. Sometimes emotions will be internalised. A child who typically loves to play autonomously may retreat from nursery life, or a child who usually eats well is seen emptying a full plate into the food waste bin.

Froebel stressed the importance of educators and family working in partnership and harmony. Families can be included in nursery life in a variety of ways – home visits, community events, sharing observations, celebrations, and through regular conversations.

In spending time together with families, their world and culture at home will become known to us. We can then understand our children and their lives outside the setting better.



Fig. 5: Children can vary tremendously in how they express their emotions

Each child is unique



Fig. 6: No child is the same as another

Froebel believed in the uniqueness of each child. He understood that no child is the same as another, and so there is no 'one size fits all' approach to successfully interacting with a child or understanding their view of the world.

When an educator really knows the child, they can implement an individualised approach.

Critically, some children may have additional needs which require particular support, e.g., a child may have a clinical diagnosis, where the educator will work alongside specialist services, in order to support the child.

It is likely that all children will have additional needs at some time: perhaps because the sensory stimuli of a playroom are overwhelming, because they are ill, they have a family bereavement, a broken friendship, or a lack of sleep.

“Each individual is unique, [and] has the power to express himself in his distinctive way... Each person, each child has a particular gift which will become visible if circumstances are right and freedom for expression... is given.”

Liebschner 1992: 36



Fig. 7: Knowing individual children

When children feel overwhelmed

There are numerous reasons why a child needs support to confront what is upsetting them. The educators' knowledge of the child will help them in knowing what to do and what resources might support the child.

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.

Transitions can be particularly hard for some children, who may become 'stuck' in a cycle of upset. Educators will have a variety of tools and strategies to support children who are finding transitions difficult. They will be attuned to an individual child's preferences for specific resources or friends who might be able to help calm them. Often children will enjoy the opportunity to interact with soothing natural materials, like water, sand and clay or find peace outside or in cosy and comforting spaces inside. For some children, humour (a silly song or made-up story) can work wonders to shift a sadness.

Sometimes, when children become overwhelmed, we may experience fury or aggression. This can be challenging, but it is in these situations that children in distress need our connection more than ever. We can take a breath and approach children with our heart full of kindness and understanding for their struggle. Patience and time will be required.



Fig. 8: Finding comforting spaces

Practice example

Stephen was in the garden, deeply engaged in his play. At noon, the educator invited Stephen to join his friends for gathering for something to eat. 'I'm not hungry', Stephen responded. The educator, after some gentle encouragement, respected Stephen's choice to continue to play in the garden. Later, Stephen came in for his lunch.

Individual and community interests

Stephen mostly played outdoors and it was likely that his circadian rhythm – the physical, emotional and behavioural changes that follow a 24-hour cycle – was not compatible with lunch at noon, especially when he was engrossed in his play.

The educators reflected: 'What if other children want to delay their lunch too?' and 'How would we cope logistically?'. They concluded that they could make a small adjustment and put lunch aside for Stephen.

Should other children choose to do this, they would discuss each situation as it arose. Over time, a small number of children did choose to have lunch at a different time or in an alternative space.

Although the more manageable option might be for everyone to eat together, when we can adjust so that a child could enjoy their lunch at a time and place that suited their needs, we are truly practising uniqueness, not sameness.



Fig. 9: Respecting children's choices

Connectedness

Children express and process their inner feelings in many different ways. Froebel introduced the concept of making the 'inner outer' and the 'outer inner'.

Inner knowledge, thoughts and feelings are expressed outwardly through behaviours and demonstrated through outer activity and experiences. These might be role play, artwork, music, dance and construction.

In the context of learning about inner emotions, Froebel believed that play is an 'integrating mechanism'.

For children to feel connected, Froebel emphasised that they should see themselves reflected in their environment.

Children can be enabled to shape their space and find areas that suit their play needs, whether that be cosy places to share quiet, reflective moments or areas for energy, speed and noise.

Resources should reflect the diversity of all members of the nursery community. They should be accessible to every child, mindful of their needs and interests.

All these things will lead to less frustration and improved harmony, where children can form positive relationships and meaningful connections with those around them.



Fig. 10: Thoughts and feelings are expressed outwardly

Narrating actions and feelings

Practice example

One way to encourage children to think about their inner feelings is to narrate their actions or our own. The concept of 'tidy up time' is difficult for children who are engrossed in another experience. However, items do need to be returned and educators can always find ways to encourage children to take part: 'I am going to return the big blocks, oh Marnie is doing the small ones, can you reach the shelf Leo?'



Fig. 11: Educators can always find ways to encourage children to take part

It's often futile to chase after children and demand their help. However, when we thank children and do not shame them into helping, they will be more inclined to be involved in the future.

That's not to say that we should not highlight where help is needed: 'I can see that you've left your plate on the snack table; I don't like having to do all the chores'.

We can also offer interpretations of how others might be feeling: 'I can see people are getting frustrated because they want a turn'. But we should try to avoid demanding that children resolve another person's hurt or immediately give up their turn.

"...education must be permissive and following, guarding and protecting only; it should neither direct nor determine nor interfere."

Froebel in Lilley 1967: 51

The path to self-regulation

“...I wanted to educate [children] to be free, to think, to take action for themselves.”

Froebel in Lilley 1967: 41



As educators our aim is that children will manage, understand and regulate their bodies, behaviour and emotions – even in difficult situations.

That’s not to say that they should internalise our wishes and beliefs, so that they do what we want even when we are not around.

Rather, the aim is for children to do what they believe is the right thing, not through an unthinking compulsion or a sense of obedience.

Our role is to support them to be independent thinkers, who can develop their own values and beliefs.

Fig. 12: Support children to be independent thinkers and actors

“Wisdom is shown when one educates oneself and others in freedom and self-awareness.”

Froebel in Lilley 1967: 50

Space for children's thinking

Practice example

It might be tempting to try and get children to do what we want by providing instruction. However, if we instead use informative statements – ‘lunch is ready’, ‘I can see it’s raining outside’, ‘I think you would feel sad if you lost Mr Pickles’ – we leave space for the children to do their own thinking. We can also enter into conversation, ‘we are going to be outside all day at nature kindergarten, I don’t want you to get too cold. What do you think?’.

For some, much younger children, they may need our adult eyes to help them regulate their bodies – a reminder to eat or wear a coat and shoes outside in wintry weather. But always with a view to children ultimately managing their own bodies, so by describing why and what is happening, rather than telling them what to do.

When children have some boundaries, it helps them to feel secure and to negotiate living in a community. They also benefit from power and freedom to make decisions and be trusted: that they know their own bodies, can decide how they dress and what they eat or when they sleep; and have control of their personal possessions and how they spend their time.

It is also important to enable children to express the full range of emotions – sadness, frustration, joy and so on, and let them follow the entire arc of their feelings.

This can be difficult for educators to experience. But it is disrespectful to dismiss children’s feelings, wants and desires by saying, for example: ‘there’s no need to cry, you are alright’ or ‘why are you getting so cross?’.

When we cast doubt on their feelings, this can lead children to question, ‘do others know my emotions better than me?’.



Fig. 13: Children need space to do their own thinking



Fig. 14: Trusting relationships lead to a more democratic, humane and cohesive community

Co-regulation

Children may need us to co-regulate their emotions – it might be difficult to make choices when they are overwhelmed, especially for younger children. We can offer a cuddle or support the emotions they are feeling: ‘You are feeling sad. You really want mummy to come back’ or ‘that really hurt your feelings’.

Educators can gently enquire about feelings so that children can start to build an understanding of emotional language: ‘I wonder if you are cross, sad, frustrated about this?’. In the future it will make it easier for the child to articulate their own feelings. For our non-verbal children or those with English as an additional language, we can help make ourselves understood with body language and tone of voice.

Over time educators should encourage children to develop responsibility for their own emotional harmony and sense of community responsibility. For example, we can ask children to think about how their bodies are feeling, encourage them to breathe deeply, say what it is they want, or move themselves away from a conflict situation to find an adult or friend who can support them.

Children can be encouraged to ‘call out’ unwanted acts happening to friends too – ‘stop hurting my friend’ or ‘I don’t think we/you should do that’. Angry feelings can be acknowledged and accepted, but boundaries also emphasised: ‘It’s ok to feel angry, but it’s not ok to hurt’.

Children will sometimes need to be supported to do some things that they may not wish to, for example, leave the building when the fire alarm is on.

When relationships are built on trust in which children and adults respect the emotions and feelings of others, this leads to a more democratic, humane and cohesive community.

Behaviour management strategies do not lead children to self-regulate

Bribing children with stickers, points and certificates encourages them to chase rewards and status, and can lead to a child who is overly concerned with pleasing others and seeking external incentives, rather than understanding the consequences of their actions (McNair 2016).

In line with Froebel's principles, Bruce (2021) argues that self-discipline is the only kind of discipline worth having, and she critiques behaviour management systems.

Bruce stresses that reward systems are short term and they promote temporary compliance, self-interest and can encourage a mind-set of 'what's in it for me?'.

This is likely to have negative effects on their well-being, including a less well developed internal moral compass and a feeling that they can't trust their own judgement.



“When assumptions about children’s attitudes are drawn from their behaviour, then widespread mistakes can be made... The child who seems rude and self-willed is often involved in an intense struggle to realise the good by [their] own effort.”

Froebel in Lilley 1967: 51

Fig. 15: Self-regulation in action
- negotiating the rules leads to harmonious play

Role of the adult: freedom with guidance

According to Froebel, the child will flourish if they are given the opportunity for freedom of expression. If the child is not free to make judgements or decisions, they will not have the ability to use freedom intelligently in adulthood.

The educator acts as a mentor to prompt the child to understand the potential consequences of their actions, and to develop self-awareness and a social conscience. Educators can engage in dialogue with children to encourage them to consider their choices and the impact their choices may have on others.

Freedom with guidance is not a laissez-faire approach, where children are left to their own devices. The sensitive attuned educator, “observes, supports and extends” the child’s experiences.

Bruce 2015: 65

In risky situations, educators might respectfully say: ‘I see you are high up’, ‘sticks can hurt’, ‘the fire is really hot’; or ask the child a question: ‘how deep do you think the pond is?’ and ask, ‘I wonder what might happen if you step too close to the edge?’.

By suggesting to children ‘let’s pause’, this leaves thinking space so that they can figure out the risk to themselves and to others. This is how guidance can enhance freedom and self-regulation is encouraged.

However, there may be occasions when we need to use more immediate language or even physical intervention if a child is in imminent danger, for example running towards a busy road.



Fig. 16: Give children the opportunity for freedom of expression

Balancing support with acceptance, freedom with guidance

Froebel stressed the value of reflection as a means of learning from experience and developing mindful and effective practice.

Practice example

“I brought in a little pot of snowdrops to show the children and decided to leave them in our ‘snug’ area so the children could take a closer look. I returned shortly to find the snowdrops had been cut and scattered across the room. Another educator explained that Mica had used the scissors to cut the flowers. I found Mica, but she ran off before a discussion could be entered into.” This provided the educator with an opportunity to reflect on what had happened and alternative actions to take now.

“How much guidance to provide and how much freedom to encourage has been, and still is, one of teachers’ greatest problems.”

Liebschner 1992: xiii

As a group, the educators discussed what had happened and numerous questions emerged: What thoughts or intentions were behind this act? Is it ok to kill a living thing? Is Mica’s curiosity and experimentation more valuable than the flowers? How can I balance the needs of an individual against the needs of the group?

This discussion led the educators to conclude that although they aspired to knowing each individual child, they could not know everything about them or what might motivate a particular act.

In the heat of the moment, educators should not track down a child and demand an explanation. In this example, they could find a moment to gently wonder with Mica about the flowers and what it meant now they were cut. Together figuring out alternative ways to enjoy flowers or perhaps where and when to use scissors and other tools. The balance of support and acceptance can be a difficult one to strike.



Fig. 17: Educators use reflection as a means of learning

According to Froebel, there is no need for adults to jump in and try to offer solutions and quick fixes.

He encouraged educators to set an example and role model ways of peaceful resolution when things go 'wrong': living alongside the child, trusting that they are capable of understanding their actions and willing to reflect, and taking responsibility.

Children should not be forced to apologise or told 'to have a good long think' about what's happened.

Sometimes there may be a conflict or disagreement over a resource. Rather than stepping in quickly, the educator should observe and, more often than not, the children will find a solution.

Educators can listen, narrate or echo what is happening and give the children space to try and resolve it. Perhaps gently placing a hand on the resource in dispute whilst children discuss a solution, possibly offering suggestions: 'Hmm, I wonder what would be fair?'.
Sometimes a child will choose to walk away and perhaps it will not always appear 'fair' with one child 'winning' over the other. Educators will know their children and when they see a child is routinely put down by another/ others, an intervention is required.

In order to avoid a situation where this child may internalise or accept control by others and it becomes their worldview, a child can be supported by finding ways to respond to conflict situations.

For example, being encouraged to move their bodies away, or practising responses: 'I don't like that' or holding a hand up and saying 'No!' or seeking support from an educator and/or friend. Educators can model this.

Educators can listen, narrate or echo what is happening and give the children space to try and resolve it. Perhaps gently placing a hand on the resource in dispute whilst children discuss a solution, possibly offering suggestions: 'Hmm, I wonder what would be fair?'.
Sometimes a child will choose to walk away and perhaps it will not always appear 'fair' with one child 'winning' over the other. Educators will know their children and when they see a child is routinely put down by another/ others, an intervention is required.



Fig. 18: Role modelling peaceful solutions

Reflecting on what has gone wrong

Practice example

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".

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

Perhaps at calmer points we can take opportunities to use books, puppets or small world resources to play out conflict or discuss difficult emotions. As human beings we are fallible and will all make mistakes. It is important to be kind to ourselves and others and apply forgiveness and understanding as we all live and learn together.



Fig. 19: Living and learning together

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 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.



Time to reflect

As educators we also need to be mindful not to rush children, but to appreciate them in the moment, and facilitate their freedom of expression and creativity.

Practice example

The children and practitioner were using paint, chalk and cotton wool to make pictures. The children were close to the water tray and started to add paint to it and marvel at the swirly clouds. Chalks were crushed and added, there was a lot of splashing and pouring, water was spilled and other materials were added to the mix.

Educators might find this situation challenging, even though they can appreciate the creativity being expressed. There may be thoughts of tidying up or just letting the situation play out. They may worry about how other members of their community (e.g. colleagues) may view them and their lack of control of the situation.

Educators may fluctuate between feelings, depending on their current state of mind. Through dialogue and giving children the opportunity to reflect, a compromise can often be reached: 'I wonder what will happen if all the chalks get used, do you think that's fair for everyone?', 'I really don't like to see food or resources wasted, what do you think?'

Fig. 20: Being mindful not to rush children

Final thoughts

- Froebel advocated for educators to guide rather than control children.
- Froebel cautioned against jumping to conclusions about a child's behaviour or intentions, instead encouraging adults to look beyond 'the act'.
- Froebel believed that children flourish when given opportunities for freedom of expression.
- Strict discipline and censure have no place in a Froebelian environment.
- Children's self-regulation leads to greater understanding of the self and more co-operative relationships with others.
- Rewards reduce children's intrinsic motivation.
- Sophisticated moral thinking emerges from dialogue with others.



Fig. 21: Freedom with guidance

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Kurt David Cleary
Emma Clarkson
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Froebel Trust

Clarence Lodge
Clarence Lane
Roehampton
London SW15 5JW

w: froebel.org.uk

t: 020 8878 7546

e: office@froebeltrust.org.uk

Twitter @FroebelTrust

Facebook TheFroebelTrust

Insta @FroebelTrustUK

LinkedIn [www.linkedin.com/
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