

Play and Self-Regulation in Preschool



Are children in your classroom aware of their feelings, needs, and impulses? Can they calm themselves, control their behavior, and focus on tasks? Preschoolers who can do these things find it easier to take turns, make friends, and adapt to school routines. This ability is called “self-regulation.” Teachers often wonder how to help children self-regulate. The answer may be, “Let them play!”

Provide open-ended play time.

- Let children have long periods of time daily to plan and take part in play activities. When you ask children ahead of time to choose what they want to play, you help them focus attention and follow through on plans. “Dmitri, your plan was to play a board game. What game do you want? We have Candy Land, Guess Who, and Chutes and Ladders on our game table today.”
- Offer open-ended materials so children can plan creatively: blocks, sand, water, colorful scarves, streamers, etc. They may turn blocks into a city, a hill, or a bed. The scarves may become clouds, a waterfall, or blankets. Some children may need a little help getting started as they work with open-ended materials. Subtle prompts or choices may help. “How high will you build your block tower today?” “Would you like to start by digging in the sand or use tools to draw pictures in the sand?”
- Help children put disappointments into words so they can calm themselves and focus on putting things back together. “Your block tower fell and you feel frustrated. You could build another one. Or do you want to put away the blocks and play with something else?”

Encourage make-believe play.

- Provide props so children can take different roles: parent, baby, rescue worker, pet, dancer, magician. A child who pretends with others learns to follow the “rules” of the role he plays. “I’m the waiter. I give you a menu, and you tell me what you want to eat. Then I tell our cook what to make and bring the food to you when it’s ready.”
- Observe to find out if children internally monitor their behavior as they play their make-believe roles. “I can’t play with Celia now. I’m being the waiter for Kaya and Will.”
- Give children a chance to set limits when a playmate doesn’t follow the rules. They will often remind each other to control impulses during make-believe play: “Don’t growl at me, waiter. Waiters don’t scare people. They take orders and deliver food.”

Help children negotiate with each other during pretend play.

- When children disagree, encourage them to talk to each other about what they want. “Liam, you wanted to use the large blocks to build an airplane, but Carlos started to create a boat. Share your idea with him and see if you can work out a plan.”
- If plans have to be changed, remind the children that they have options. “You want the magic wand, but it’s still Emma’s turn. You can sit and wait, or you could pretend this cape is magic and wear it until Emma is done.”

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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