

Using the practice Executive function and self-regulation

This resource outlines some strategies to embed the development of executive function and self-regulation in your early childhood education and care setting.

Engage in sustained shared conversations with children

One way to develop executive function and self-regulation in children is to engage in ‘sustained shared conversations’. The Early Years Learning Framework states that sustained shared conversations are an important strategy for educators and teachers to employ. By asking children questions, educators can prompt children to explore their ideas in more depth. Educators can extend children’s thinking by working together to solve a problem, clarify an issue, evaluate learning experiences or extend a narrative. Opportunities for engaging in sustained shared conversations can occur throughout the day during routines, transitions, planned and spontaneous experiences.

Strategies for engaging in sustained shared conversations with children aged 3-5 years are outlined in the following table. For examples of sustained shared conversations that develop children’s literacy and numeracy skills, see [literacy](#) and [numeracy](#) resources.

Strategy	Question stems to encourage conversations	Examples
Prompt children to explain their thinking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘How did you know...?’ • ‘Why does this...?’ • ‘Why do you think...?’ • ‘Why can’t we...?’ • ‘What happens next?’ 	‘I can see that you are a bit tired! Why do you think we yawn when we are tired? What else can you feel when you are tired?’
Help children to think through alternatives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘I wonder what would happen if...?’ • ‘What is another way we could try...?’ 	‘I can see you have tried to glue these two pieces together. They keep falling apart! What else can we use?’ [child’s response] ‘I like that idea. Let’s see if it is going to be strong enough.’

Strategy	Question stems to encourage conversations	Examples
Encourage children to elaborate, recap, and clarify ideas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I really want to know more about...' • 'So, you think that...' 	<p>'Tell me more about what you did on the weekend.'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'Why was that your favourite part?'</p> <hr/> <p>'I can see how excited you are. I'd like to know more about your dance class. Tell me more.'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'That is fascinating! What are they called? What other moves did you practice?'</p>
Offer suggestions to help children extend their ideas.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Could we try doing it this way...?' • 'What if you...?' • 'I find it useful when...' • 'Have you thought about trying...?' 	<p>'I see that you're playing with the dinosaur in the sandpit. Do you think he is getting hot?'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'Do you have any ideas to help the dinosaur cool down?'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'A swim would cool me down. Where can the dinosaur have a swim?'</p>
Provide examples of how to problem solve and model your thinking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'I have to think hard about...' • 'I need to...' • 'First I will ... and then I will ... and then I can...' 	<p>'I know things can get frustrating when they don't go your way. When I get stuck, I like to take a big breath and then come back to it later.'</p> <hr/> <p>'Oh dear, I can see that the kite is stuck in the tree. How do we get it back?'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'I don't think that you are tall enough. How about we go to the shed to see if we have something that can reach that far.'</p>
Show genuine interest and provide encouragement for further thinking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'That's an interesting idea!' • 'I like what you have done.' • 'You have thought really hard about ... what can you do next?' 	<p>'I think your sister is really going to like this card you made for her birthday!'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'What could we write in her card to wish her a happy day?'</p>

Developing executive function and self-regulation throughout the day

Here are some examples of when you might build opportunities to develop executive function and self-regulation into different learning experiences and interactions throughout the day for children aged 3-5. These examples show how you may start a conversation and illustrate a pause where the child can engage and steer the conversation

Moments in the day	Example of how to build in executive function and self-regulation	What this might sound like with children
Drop off	Greet children and show an interest in their lives.	<p>'Hi Freya! It's nice to see you today. We missed you yesterday! I heard that you had fun at the zoo.'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'Tell me what you saw!'</p>
	Use this time to assist children with morning transition and separation from their family.	<p>'I can see you are upset today, would you like to tell me what happened?'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'Oh, I am sad to hear that your favorite truck broke on the way to the centre. Let's see if we can find another one.'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'I know that Thanh is going to be arriving shortly; do you think you and he might like to play in the sandpit today?'</p>
Mealtime	Use mealtimes as opportunities for children to show their self-regulation skills.	'I can see we are super hungry today! Let's all go inside and wash our hands, and then we can set the tables for lunch.'
		'When we are eating, we need to sit properly on our chair. Remember you fell the other day and hurt your arm? That was quite painful wasn't it?'

Moments in the day	Example of how to build in executive function and self-regulation	What this might sound like with children
Planned and spontaneous experiences	Help children name and understand feelings through stories and events.	<p>'Damien's dog ran away. How is he feeling?'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'Yes, you can see that he is feeling sad! Lots of people cry when they are feeling sad, just like this boy. What do you do when you are feeling sad?'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'What do you think might help him feel better?'</p>
	Join in interactions to help children practice the skills and strategies they have been learning.	<p>'Sure, I can be the child! If I am the child, who are you?'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'Ok! What would you like me to do to get ready?'</p>
	Assist children in managing conflict or difficult situations and build their self-regulation skills.	<p>'I would be angry too, if someone hid my shoes. How about you tell Luca how you feel. What could you say?'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'Perhaps you can say, "It makes me feel angry not knowing where my shoes are".'</p>
	Ensure children have access to spaces to help them self-regulate – such as a quiet space, cubby or tent.	<p>'I noticed you came into the tent to get some quiet time. It's great that you felt comfortable doing that.'</p>
	Acknowledge children's ability and effort.	<p>'You have worked so hard building that sandcastle! I wonder what you are going to do next?'</p>

Moments in the day	Example of how to build in executive function and self-regulation	What this might sound like with children
Planned and spontaneous experiences	Provide opportunities for children to understand time and limits and how it may influence their feelings.	<p>'Remember, this experience is for four children only, that is why we have four chairs set up.'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'I can see how patiently you are waiting for your turn! Look, I have written down your name on the board, so when someone is finished they will come and get you.'</p>
	Support and role model strategies to help children overcome challenges.	<p>'I can see that you are trying really hard to make your marble run. It is really frustrating when something doesn't work isn't it?'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'I know you don't want to give up. What would you like to do? Did you want to have another go, or have a little break?'</p>
Pick up	Provide check-in with parents and primary caregivers highlighting the skills their child is developing.	<p>'Oscar, tell mummy how you solved that tricky puzzle!'</p> <p>[child's response]</p> <p>'And what did you do next?'</p>