



A Froebelian approach

# Creating environments for children to play and learn

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# Contents



## **This is an interactive document**

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# Froebelian principles

Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852) was the inventor of kindergarten 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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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## 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](https://froebel.org.uk)



# Introduction



Fig. 1: A nurturing adult supports a child to engage with nature

**This pamphlet explores a Froebelian approach to the learning environment including examples of resources and experiences to support children's play and learning.**

Froebel (1782-1852) highlighted the importance of the experiences offered to children, and the role of the adult. By thinking carefully about all aspects of the child's environment and how they link – including access to resources, indoor and outdoor spaces, the natural world, knowledgeable and nurturing educators and the local community – educators can create inclusive settings which value and nurture the whole child.

Tovey describes a Froebelian environment as '...creative and open ended and it includes a balance of bought and found materials, made and natural. It is based on respect, trust, warm responsive relationships and rich first-hand and play experience.' (2017, p.35)

A key Froebelian principle is for educators to understand that children are powerful learners and they can support children by providing rich and thoughtfully considered environments. Froebel believed that children can develop responsibility for their own environments given the right support and guidance.

# The Froebelian principles of effective environments for play and learning

“Children cannot learn without real, direct first-hand experience.”

Bruce 2011, p.65

Children play and learn in a whole range of environments including in the home, nursery schools, kindergartens, with childminders, at clubs and groups, in their own community and on trips further afield - providing them with many rich first-hand experiences.

All Froebelian environments are unique. However, there are common key **Froebelian principles** which underpin an effective environment:

- The principle of **unity and connectedness** characterises a Froebelian environment. Spaces for children should acknowledge the many aspects of a child's life and nurture their connection to families, communities and the natural world around them. The child's environment promotes holistic learning and enables children to make connections between their own experiences and their ideas.
- In a Froebelian environment, **play** is considered of the greatest importance and educators prioritise children's first-hand experiences, value their play and nurture their interactions with others. A Froebelian environment gives children the time to wallow in their play (Bruce 2020).
- **Autonomous learners** try things out and solve problems for themselves, achieving success through their own endeavours, including seeking support or guidance from others when required. Children need environments that allow them to explore and experiment. Environments which promote independence and autonomy are led by educators who respect what children can do and support them to reflect upon their learning.

“This interconnectivity is one of the most important features of the Froebelian educational approach.”

Bruce 2021, p.19

- Children need environments that promote creativity, imagination and the symbolic life of the child. A Froebelian environment offers children diverse open-ended resources and experiences. For example: space to develop role play; support to try musical instruments; time to explore clay; opportunities to connect in and with nature. Children need resources which reflect the diversity of all members of the community and are accessible and relevant.

**“Play is the highest level of child development... So it promotes enjoyment, satisfaction, serenity and constitutes the source of all that can benefit the child.”**

Froebel in Lilley 1967, p.83

- **Strong relationships** underpin a Froebelian environment. Nurturing connections between child, family and educator are key to a Froebelian approach. Considering where adults spend their time in an early years setting and how they interact with children is a crucial part of creating positive learning environments.
- **Knowledgeable and nurturing educators** enable children to feel part of their community. They support children to navigate their learning environment, to experiment, to develop their understandings of the world around them and gain the confidence to take on new challenges.

All Froebelian environments are connected by these principles. Educators rise above their immediate environment and are not reliant upon certain resources to enable meaningful experiences.

**“Froebel argued that self-activity on its own was not enough. Children should become aware of their own learning so that they ‘know’ something in a deeper, more self-reflective way.”**

Tovey 2017, p.115



Fig. 2: An example of symbolic representation - “Making a crocodile”. Open-ended resources can be transformed into whatever children want them to be.

# Creating rich spaces for children to play and learn

Educators creating an environment for children need to consider the whole space and how it can be transformed to meet the needs and interests of children. No matter the setting, Froebelian practice supports educators to work creatively – even with those features of a space or building that cannot easily be changed.



Fig. 3 a–f: Every Froebelian setting is unique – creatively using the spaces and resources available



The environment may include resources which allow children to self-select the things that they need to develop and sustain their play. It's also about the choices made about the lay-out, spaces and provocations. A rich environment encourages investigation through open-ended resources which allow for many outcomes to stimulate the enquiring mind. Children with additional needs may explore resources in innovative ways. This is illustrated by Froebel's emphasis on the unique child. Tovey (2020) refers to the community being enriched by diversity.

There need to be opportunities to engage with nature both inside and outside, making the most of varying surfaces such as grass, mud, sandy paths and hills.

Children need to be able to assess risk for themselves, developing their sense of self.

**"...practitioners should be aware of the way in which familiar resources and equipment can be made available to support individuals and groups... a rich and varied environment and freedom to explore it, will support children as they play."**

Louis et al 2013, p.36

**"Immersion in nature enables children to develop meaningful connections with the world. Children can observe, describe, compare, measure, wonder and marvel at the world we live in."**

d'Ascoli and Hunter 2022, p.8



Fig.4 a-b: Assessing risk when climbing trees

Educators can carefully observe how children engage with the resources, navigate their setting and interact with others. They recognise that flexibility and a 'slow' approach is important in children's play and learning and need to have the confidence to make time for listening, discussion and wondering and to be "open to the unexpected" (Clark 2023 p.75).

These observations can deepen educators' understanding of how each child's learning develops from the opportunities that their environment offers. Educators recognise that flexibility is important in children's play and learning.

Fig. 5 a-c : Space to play; places to hide



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## Welcoming children

Educators are key to creating a welcoming and stimulating learning environment. Educators who have a genuine interest in children's lives understand that relationships matter. Educators can gather important information and use it to respond to each child, for example, knowing that a child has had a birthday or that a child's family has recently been moved into temporary accommodation. This illustrates a sensitivity to the wider life of the child, their interests and needs. Strong, trusting relationships are particularly important to support children with additional needs.

Froebel believed the kindergarten should reflect the home and educators should recognise the importance of parents and carers as the child's first educators. Being in a calm, warm and supportive environment with people who care and want the best for each child will support high levels of wellbeing and involvement (Laevers 2000). Today, educators who fulfil that role are often described as the Key Person (Elfer 2003).

Elfer describes their role as "Seeing and hearing through each child's eyes and ears, putting ourselves in their shoes, and responding to their need for intimacy and attachment while not imposing it..." (Elfer et al 2003, p.31).

Knowledgeable, nurturing educators build and sustain the trusting relationships that enable each unique child and their family to feel welcomed and valued members of the community. Froebel believed in starting with what each unique child can do, an approach which is particularly supportive of children with additional needs.



Fig. 6: Calm and supportive adults observe children's reactions

## Practice example

Families are encouraged to create, with their child, a small shoe box of familiar things in preparation for attending the setting. The box might contain photographs; toys that are loved (but not too special); favourite stories or leaflets of places visited. The children keep their box in the setting for as long as needed. The box is used to offer comfort and help children self-regulate when they are upset or need reassurance. It allows adults to engage with children's home experiences and can be shared with other children at small group time.

Jack, aged 3, was missing his Mummy who had left him for the first time. He was sitting by the door, crying and rocking back and forth asking 'Mummy come?'. Sue, his key person, took his 'all about me' box and sat next to him on the floor giving him reassurance and comfort. She opened the box and waited for Jack to acknowledge it by showing some interest. At that point she mirrored his interest and quietly and gently they explored the box together. Sue waited for Jack to begin the conversation about his favourite things from home which enabled him to regulate his feelings at his own pace.



Fig. 7: Special things brought in from home help to give reassurance

## Creating an environment where everyone belongs

Froebel advocated close relationships between school and home, family and community. At any time, a Froebelian environment may include parents and carers settling in a child, playing alongside and supporting children, and sharing in the joy of learning. Parents have unique skills and knowledge which can be shared with children and educators.

Meeting parents and carers to build trust and respectful relationships is key to creating an inclusive and harmonious environment. Children observe how adults interact with each other, which helps give them confidence to trust other children and educators.



Fig. 8: Inviting parents to come and play alongside their child in the early years setting helps to build strong attachments, trust and connectedness

**“Parents, in Froebel’s view, need encouragement and support. They need to be empowered. This is very different from telling parents how to bring up their children.”**

Bruce 2021, p.126



Fig. 9: A space where joy is shared

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## Making connections: gardening and nature

By engaging with the world children learn that they are part of a community. This illustrates Froebel's fundamental concept of **unity and connectedness** - where the many parts contribute to the whole.

Children's curiosity about the natural world helps them learn how to respect and care for the environment through hands-on explorations and investigations. They develop an awareness of recycling, growing and harvesting plants as well as looking after animals and insects. Knowledgeable adults skilfully guide children to learn about the natural world. Adults need to be particularly supportive of children with additional needs.

**“The whole enables the possibility to see, understand and use the parts, their function and purpose.”**

Bruce 2021, p.33

Where settings have limited space, opportunities to become immersed in nature can be found creatively or within the community. For example, trips to the local park, nature reserves or the beach provide rich first-hand experiences.

Children can be encouraged to engage with nature through looking at a selection of indoor plants with different qualities. Simply planting a bean in a pot or seeds from their apple eaten for snack and watching them grow on the windowsill can be a fascinating experience.



**“A Froebelian approach encourages and supports children to make connections between different areas of the environment, between resources and fundamentally between ideas.”**

Tovey 2017, p.38

**“The child or boy who has cared for another living thing, even though it is of a lower order, is more easily led to care for his own life.”**

Froebel in Lilley 1967, p.129



Fig. 10 a-b: Collecting leaves, shells or branches to bring inside for exploration provides first-hand experiences of nature

Finding space to grow fruits and vegetables allows children to engage with nature, use tools and cook and eat the things they have grown (d'Ascoli and Hunter 2022). Even in small spaces, pots and planters can be used. Children explore changes (growth and decay, changes in seasons). A small selection of real gardening tools, such as small forks and trowels, can be made available for children to access themselves.



Fig. 11 a-b: Children are connected through their play to the natural world, using their senses to experience the outdoors





Children need to be supported by adults to assess risk for themselves (indoors and outdoors), developing their sense of self.

**“Play that involves risk and challenge lets babies and toddlers experiment with problem-solving. It gives them chances to discover their individuality, lead their own learning, and understand themselves in relation to their world.”**

Cooper 2023, p.4



Fig. 12 a–d: A Froebelian environment enables children to engage with all aspects of nature in direct and meaningful ways



Fig. 13: Barriers to spending time outdoors are reduced if wet weather clothing is readily available for all children and educators



## Mother songs, literacy and books

Froebel developed his *Mother Songs* (Froebel 1878) as a resource for both the family at home and the kindergarten. For very young children, coming together with their key person in a small group can be a time to sing and enjoy action rhymes and finger plays. It's a time to share stories, read books and act them out with puppets or small world toys. Having an attractive display of books that shows the front cover lets children choose for themselves. A good variety of information books that extend current interests, including traditional stories, favourite rhymes and poetry pique children's interest, especially when an educator is there to read and discuss with the children. Books indoors and outdoors that relate to children's experiences can help them see the relevance that books can have to our daily lives. These can be homemade books, featuring the children themselves.

Having books in the languages spoken by the children and a library for children and families to borrow from links home and nursery. A well-stocked mark-making and drawing area near books encourages children to begin to explore a wide variety of implements and papers, ascribe meaning to their marks in conversation and be introduced to the script of their language. Froebel recognised that children need purposes to write and are motivated by their own name.



Fig. 14 a-c: Children need to be able to access resources to make marks and express their inner ideas and thoughts

## Creativity, imagination and symbolic representation

Cultivating creativity, imagination and symbolic representation are central to a Froebelian environment. Creativity is about being curious, solving problems, making choices, envisaging alternative worlds, making new connections and thinking in original ways. It is about representing one's own ideas through a wide range of different media. All children can be creative if it is nurtured and supported. Some essential features of an environment for creativity include:

- Opportunities for provocative experiences which invite curiosity, exploration and enquiry.
- Freedom to try things out, take risks and pursue one's own ideas.
- An ethos which values originality rather than conformity.
- An abundance of time to get engrossed in playing, doing and making.

- Flexible spaces which can be transformed by children's imaginations and prevailing interests.
- Good quality recycled and bought resources which spark imagination and offer symbolic possibilities.
- Frequent links with cultural representations in art, music, dance, drama and scientific enquiry through, for example, involving skilled parents, visits in by performers or visits out to galleries.
- A gathering space for songs, rhymes, movement and story.

**“One begins to understand that which one strives to represent.”**

**Froebel in Lilley 1967, p.87**



Fig. 15: Fiction and non-fiction attractively displayed to encourage children to make connections

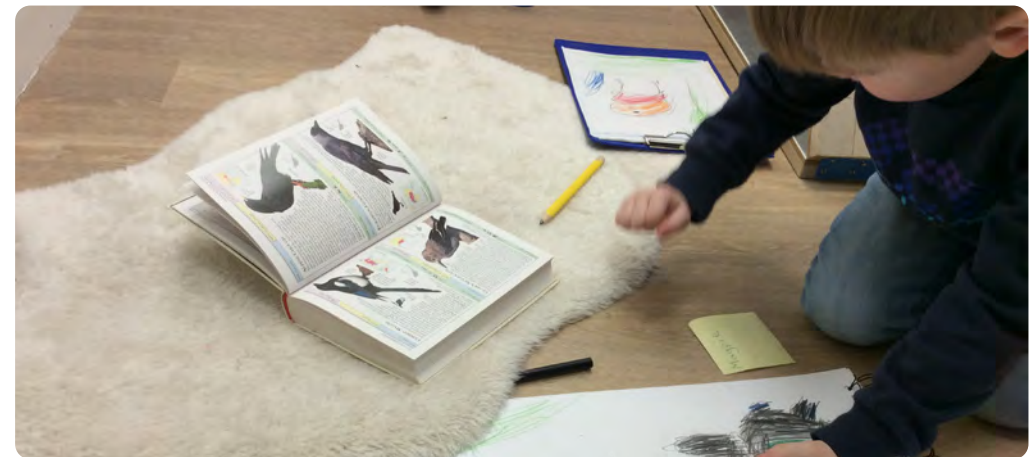


Fig. 16: Educators support children to find the information they need in books



Fig. 17 a-b: Comfortable spaces where children can connect with others and to share books and be creative with music



Fig. 18 a-b: Children need space to understand how symbols work in drawing and writing and connect to everyday life

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## Open-ended resources

Children build up skills and knowledge using open-ended resources which promote exploration, problem-solving, and divergent thinking. Open-ended resources provide opportunities for creativity, for example, using lengths of fabric in play could become an underwater creature, a princess dress or a belt for a pirate.

Open-ended resources don't need to be expensive. Collections of items such as fabrics, leaves, feathers, pine cones, shells, bracelets, balls, buttons, lids etc. all provide endless opportunity for pattern making, sorting, imagination and role play. They can be used in many areas such as construction and water play.



Fig. 19 a-b: Open-ended resources allow for many different outcomes and enable all children to succeed



## Children's ideas - using spaces to connect and transform

Children regularly transport resources, for example, when playing in the water tray they may take cups of water to the role play area to use with the dolls. Play flows to other areas and the water is transformed into drinks for babies. Children may regularly fill containers with a variety of 'treasure' that they find and take it to enjoy in quiet places. Repetitive play behaviours are often described as schemas. Moving resources from one area to another is an example of the transporting schema.

Sometimes, for the educator, managing this creative thought and play can be a challenge as resources will be moved, lost and potentially damaged. Respect for others' play and for the environment can be encouraged if children are encouraged and supported to return resources when the play has ended.

**“The word schema is generally used to describe patterns of repeated behaviour which children use to explore and express their developing ideas and thoughts through play and exploration.”**

Louis et al 2013 p.1



Fig. 20 a-b: 'Found' objects that children may or may not have experienced in their everyday life provide rich opportunities to explore and find things out. They are accessible to all children including those with additional needs

# Using Froebelian resources



Fig. 21: Exploring space, shape, height and balance

## Froebel's Gifts

Froebel devised a series of 'Gifts' for children to encourage creativity, mathematical understanding and social play. They illustrated Froebel's belief in forms of **life, beauty and knowledge**.

The blocks reflect Froebel's concept of unity. He recognised the importance of children being able to play freely with them. Today, blocks of varying sizes and shapes provide endless opportunities for creativity (Whinnett 2020).

Children express their inner ideas in outer forms and vice versa with modifications and refinements. For example, a child's symbolic representation of a boat using blocks. This resource can be a social one where children communicate, predict what will happen and experience joy both in creating and demolishing together. As a solitary activity, children may explore the properties of the blocks, immersing themselves in their own ideas, such as what the blocks could represent and planning what they might do with them.

**"Children were encouraged to explore and represent objects from daily life as well as more abstract concepts of beauty and knowledge in the forms they created."**

Whinnett 2020, p.3



Fig. 22: Hollow blocks, generous space and time allow children to play alongside and collaboratively with their peers, learning skills such as how to negotiate, co-operate, make suggestions and plan



Fig. 23: Blocks allow for individual and collaborative play, negotiating the space with others

## The Occupations

Froebel introduced many Occupations some of which have been adapted for contemporary practice. The Occupations include experiences such as woodworking, sewing and clay, which were part of a whole approach emphasising different aspects of learning. A Froebelian environment creates both time and areas of the setting to allow children to engage in these experiences.

Some settings may have a dedicated area for Occupations only available when an adult is supporting. Others may choose to provide the opportunities outside, while for some it may be part of everyday provision.

Most of the Occupations can be used in a variety of settings as they can be stored easily, used inside, outside and in small spaces. Resources can be kept simple, to be packed away if necessary. Many resources can be re-used and recycled, supporting children's understanding of sustainability for the wider environment.

Sometimes educators may feel that introducing some of the Occupations may be too risky or challenging. However, with anything new, if educators understand their value and how to manage risks, they can offer the guidance needed and introduce the Occupations safely, encouraging children to eventually manage their own risks.

**“First, there is plastic material - soft clay, wet sand, water, and air to drive and turn things. Second, there are less solid objects such as small flat pieces of wood, smooth paper, or sticks and threads. Last, there is a choice of dry sand, sawdust, glass which can be moistened and breathed on, and objects such as slates, slate-pencils, paper, chalk or crayons. So the child takes pleasure in drawing and painting, and both are essential for his education.”**

Froebel in Lilley 1967, p113



Fig. 24: Clay, a selection of simple tools and an interested adult allows for exploration, problem solving, imagination and creativity



Fig. 25: Freedom with guidance: the adult offers suggestions to support model making with wood

- In many settings, clay is often overlooked in favour of playdough or similar products. Froebel saw clay as the most malleable of the Occupations, supporting the child to explore solid shapes. When children work with clay they are working with the earth and there is a direct connection to nature (Parker 2019). There is greater

resistance with clay so children have to work harder to manipulate it, building strong core muscles. With some simple preparation, clay can easily be integrated into everyday practice. An airtight container for the clay, hessian cloth for the table, oil for hands and sponges, water in a tray or spray bottle are a good start.

- Woodwork gives children first-hand experiences with real objects and tools such as small screwdrivers and metal hammers. A well-organised environment and freedom with guidance help children learn to work autonomously, manage risk and develop strong fine motor muscles and hand-eye coordination (Moorhouse 2021). They begin to

understand the properties of different types of wood and ways of fixing things together. They learn from the richness of the whole experience, which includes sensory connections to materials. Differing sizes of balsa wood, child-size real hammers and small nails are the basic resources needed to get started.



- Cooking provides opportunities for exploring and using foods (Denton and Parker 2024). It may involve following a recipe or the simple experience of allowing children to cut open a tomato and explore this magical moment using all their senses. Collecting a box of resources for cooking including small chopping boards, knives, bowls and spoons promotes independence.



Fig. 26 a-b: Recipe cards make links with literacy and support children in developing independent cooking



- Sewing and weaving can be a fascinating experience for children (Imray, Thomson and Whinnett 2023). There is pleasure in joining materials and creating with stitches. Children gain a sense of achievement and success in creating something unique and overcoming challenges. Simple ideas to start could be weaving materials such as sticks and leaves through a fence or willow tunnel. On a smaller scale, children can make their own holes in card with a hole punch and then thread patterns with large needles and wool.



Fig. 27: The nurturing adult supports through encouragement, helping to keep the willow still so that the child can concentrate on weaving



Fig. 28 a-b: Accessible resources for sewing and weaving

## Practice example

An early-years setting owned a woodwork bench but it was seldom used as the educators lacked confidence. Following a high-quality training session, they began to understand the value of woodwork for young children. The team went on to set up a well-equipped woodwork area. The children now have daily access to plentiful resources and simple tools. Adults guide the children in more complex skills and using tools such as saws and drills. Woodwork is now an integral part of provision. The understanding and motivation demonstrated by the educators was crucial for this change. A key Froebelian principle is that of guided reflection and educators who value their own learning.



Fig. 29: First-hand experience of using tools and equipment

# Role of the adult



Fig. 30: A small selection of sand resources are organised with 'shadows' so that the children can tidy up when they are finished with them, supporting them to return resources to the correct place

Creating environments that promote independence and prioritising time to engage with children helps educators to develop secure knowledge of each child and create nurturing, respectful relationships to support and extend their learning.

When spaces for play and learning are co-created with children, the role of the educator is pivotal to ensuring children are involved in making decisions and influencing their environments. For example, children who want to bath the babies in the role play area jointly decide with the educators what resources they might need.

**“What children can do (rather than what they cannot do) is the starting point for a child’s learning.”**

Bruce 2011, p.220

These spaces may be temporary in nature, such as in a pack away setting, or may remain for longer to encourage extended play. Through observation of children’s play in the environment, educators enhance the learning by responding to what captures the child’s interests. For example, educators might gather a variety of hats for role play to provoke thought, conversation and to further develop a child’s role play character. Educators might pose or respond to a problem that could be solved by the children, such as how to pick apples from the top of a tree, or suggest moving furniture to accommodate the children’s developing interests or play. These enhancements to learning are supported by educators who are confident and knowledgeable in observing children’s play.



Fig. 31: Blocks can be displayed so that children can see the similarities and differences in them and the mathematical connections between them. For example, placing the small half units next to the units



Fig. 32: Encouraging children to help care for their environment

The educator helps children to respect their environment and look after it. One way of supporting this could be by providing resources labelled with photographs or cut out shapes to create shadowing (see Fig. 30) so children know where to put things back - whilst still being mindful of the need for flexibility. Resources can be easily selected by children themselves. Educators might also assess risk with the children. This collaborative approach, which demonstrates both trust and respect from both the educator and the child, reflects Froebel's principle that relationships matter. Environments need to be co-created with the children and resources need to be freely available for children to transport, transform and lose themselves in their play.

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## Froebelian educators:

- Encourage children to care for their environment through providing child sized mops, brooms etc. and involving children in repair and mending jobs with adults.
- Support children to put things away when they are no longer needed.
- Promote children's sense of belonging to the environment, ensuring their cultural home life is reflected in their experience in the setting.
- Enable children to be aware of others and how to be part of a community, for example, knowing how to share things with their friends.
- Develop a consistent approach within the setting about expectations, for example, can books be taken outside to read?
- Are aware of the importance of flexibility to meet the needs of children, particularly those with additional needs.

- Make ethical decisions about the resources they use and consider the impact on the environment and planet, for example, reducing the use of plastic in all aspects of procurement – including wet wipes, small plastic toys, office supplies, storage containers etc. (Stewart 2024)

Reflective Froebelian educators understand that observing rhythms and moments (Clark 2023) rather than rigid routines can provide greater opportunities for engagement and allow children to remain immersed in activity. Timings of everyday events such as tidying up, snack or lunch might be amended if the adult feels that the flow of children's play could be interrupted (Green and Clark 2024). It is essential to allow children time to develop their play and, if necessary, come back to it later. This may mean not tidying everything away so that play can continue and be returned to. For example, providing a safe space for models which are unfinished to be kept so that they can be revisited.



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## Thriving with nurturing adults

Froebelian environments are flexible and allow for change. Children need guidance which encourages them to keep themselves safe and think of others. For example, they need to know that they wash their hands before eating or they put on their protective glasses before going to the woodwork table. Providing children with this guidance gives them freedom to be autonomous. It may not be universally the same across settings as it must reflect the context. An environment where adults and children reflect and decide together will enable children to develop autonomy and promote independence. These qualities will support children to develop greater resilience.

**“Froebel does give a high place to objects but only in relation to relationships....Objects are attractive to children but only educate children in the deepest sense when they are explored in the presence of people who love them.”**

**Bruce 2011, p.220**

Froebel emphasised how important relationships are for children. He recognised the deep connection to home and community. The social and emotional environment underpins a child’s wellbeing. It is based upon the strong and nurturing relationships a child experiences.



Fig. 33: Giving children time to look, listen, reflect and use all their senses



Fig. 34: With guidance, children understand they need to be sitting for eating and drinking, but snack time might take place indoors or outdoors

The connections between the family, the educator, the child and carers are crucial. An effective environment will promote children's resilience such as taking risks and overcoming challenges. It will be one where children feel confident and positive. Children thrive in a calm environment with support from adults, whilst at the same time having ownership of their play and learning. This illustrates **freedom with guidance**.

Children can take risks, investigate and make mistakes when a supportive adult is there to help them find solutions. Froebel believed that relationships are of central importance in a child's life. They can play, think, laugh, share and investigate with the support of a reflective educator.



Fig. 35: It can take a long time to feel confident enough to take a risk



Fig. 36: Access to a tap gives children autonomy, allowing them to collect and use the water they need

**“A Froebelian approach always starts where the child is...The adult observes carefully, develops children's interests and fascinations, and gently develops the positive aspects of a child's behaviour while also building a close and consistent relationship.”**

Tovey 2017, p121



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## Reflective and thoughtful educators

Children will naturally seek to share their experiences with others. In an effective environment, educators will consider how it encourages (or discourages) shared experiences and collaboration. Reflective educators will ensure all children are included and represented. Through observing children's play and reflecting on their own engagement, educators will ensure play flows freely and promotes children's independence and autonomy to develop and learn.

There will be times when an educator invites the child to join an experience that the adult has initiated but they must also prioritise many times when these roles are reversed by joining the child's play without taking the lead. This reflects Froebel's principle of valuing childhood in its own right.

**“Sometimes children begin to initiate play, and sometimes adults trigger it.”**

**Bruce 2021, p.66**

**“Froebel also emphasised that teachers had to work and play with the children because it created a genuine bond between teacher and taught, a bond which would promote respect for each other.”**

**Liebschner 1992, p.139**

Through observation, educators recognise where children may need support. For example, with the everyday task of dressing they can help them to become independent and share pride in achievements. This builds mutual respect and trust.

Froebel's principle of freedom with guidance suggests educators give children timely support alongside the tools and opportunities to make their own decisions, follow their own interests and think for themselves. At times, the children will determine the direction of their play or learning which an adult may join in with and at other times the knowledgeable adult may encourage a particular focus.



Fig. 37 a-b: Children play alongside and collaboratively with their peers, learning how to negotiate, collaborate, make suggestions and plan. The educator facilitates play without directing



# Final thoughts

A rich environment where a child can thrive is built upon key elements:

- Environments that truly value the **importance of play** allow children to have ownership of their play. They have the **freedom** to bring their own ideas and experiences with them. Froebelian educators allow children to ‘wallow’ (Bruce 2020) and learn at their own pace.
- **First-hand** and **open-ended** experiences with resources that inspire and invite exploration allow children to be **connected** to the world. Where children can interact with real things such as vegetables, tools and clay they understand their properties and make connections.
- Educators who observe, **reflect** and want to learn. They support play and learning through Froebel’s principles of **freedom with guidance**. They skilfully interact and extend children’s interests.
- **Relationships that connect** the child, educator and family, help children to develop a sense of community. Showing respect and care for each other allows children to develop an understanding of how to nurture their own environment and the natural world.

**“the child is in living relationship with the present, past and future of human development.”**

Froebel in Lilley 1967, p.57



Fig. 38: Adults encourage respectful play. Helping each other and waiting for their turn

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Together the Cornwall Nursery Schools have undertaken a post pandemic Froebel Trust funded project entitled '[Building stronger relationships with parents and carers.](#)' They have a long history of supporting early years settings and developing early years research and international learning.

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