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A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO
FROEBEL

This free document has been created
to support childminders, nurseries
and schools interested in learning
about Froebelian principles



FROEBEL

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WHO WAS FROEBEL?

In 1837, Friedrich Froebel created the kindergarten for children aged 2-7 years. He had the idea and the vision for a place where boys and girls may develop at the right pace for them, through play and self-activity, in tune with nature, and under the guidance of experienced adults. Froebel developed materials to give children worthwhile, educational experiences. They include the Gifts and Occupations, Mother (Family) Songs, movement games and engaging in and with nature. Froebel wanted children to learn how to be independent, think for themselves and act on their own knowledge and experience.

WHAT IS A FROEBELIAN APPROACH?

A Froebelian approach is not a method, but an approach which gives a consistent framework for working with young children and their families. It is founded on several ideas:

- unity
- connectedness
- link - always link
- freedom with guidance
- law of opposites
- begin where the learner is and not where you want them to be
- self-activity as the best form of learning
- allowing each child to develop at their own pace

These ideas are supported and promoted by a set of Froebelian principles.



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FROBELIAN PRINCIPLES

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.'

Education should stress all facets of the development of the whole child, including ideas, thoughts, feelings, relationships, the physical body, movement, health and spiritual life. Froebel saw different aspects of development and learning as being interconnected: physical, social, emotional, mental development and language. He believed that we should not separate one area of development from another. These areas of development link closely together, overlapping and influencing each other.

Learning should be meaningful and connected to children's own experiences. It should not be divided up into subjects but should be experienced as a meaningful whole so that children can connect new ideas to what they already know. Within the Froebelian approach, education is viewed as a collaborative effort between the child, the community and circumstances in which they learn, and the knowledge and skills they acquire.



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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.'

A core principle of a Froebelian approach is instead of starting where you believe the learner should be, start where they are. One of the biggest issues for educators is deciding how much freedom and how much direction to offer. Children learn best when they are trusted with responsibility, allowed to try new things, acknowledged as independent learners, and allowed to make mistakes and judgements. The foundation of a child's learning is what they can already do, not what they can't.

A Froebelian approach is inherently respectful of young children. It views children as powerful learners, motivated from birth to explore, investigate and be curious about the world and to try, through their own efforts, to understand it. Education has the greatest impact when it builds on this powerful urge to learn. This means educators helping children to learn how to be more reflective about their own activities in order to understand things more thoroughly. Froebel placed a great deal of value on adults encouraging children to reflect. He made the case that it was the most important aspect of 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.'

Childhood should be cherished and respected on its own terms because it is not a preparation for adulthood but rather an integral part of it. Play and first-hand experiences are crucial to young children's learning. Play incorporates all learning and is a child's primary means of development, enabling them to function at their highest levels. Educators work best when they are knowledgeable about the developmental phases (sequences) that children go through.

Froebel wanted educators to understand that every stage depends on the one before it. He emphasised the necessity for every child to experience each stage fully and totally, without rushing. This entails understanding how children learn when given the space and time to explore, experiment, manipulate, practise and master new abilities. Froebel understood that children and adults continued to learn throughout their lives, beginning at birth, a stage within its own right. He was aware that young children's development expanded substantially and required nurturing. He advocated the importance of young children's early childhood years. He emphasised that during these formative years, the foundation for subsequent intellectual learning is laid and that this coordination occurs through play.



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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.'

An important part of a Froebelian approach is connections with others, including those with adults and children. These are crucial to a child's development because they affect their emotional and social well-being and expand their intellectual potential. Froebel recognised the important role parents and family played in their children's life. He drew our attention to the child's awareness and relationship with themselves, their relationship and contribution to a family and their relationship with the community.

Children should be treated with close, trustworthy, responsive, participatory and intellectually stimulating relationships. As these interactions will affect how educators observe and respond to the children in their care. It is important for educators to build genuine, supportive relationships with each child. Educators may achieve this by creating opportunities for children to play with them and with each other; being accessible when children need them and treating them fairly.



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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.'

According to Froebel, symbols can be used creatively with flexible, open-ended materials. For instance, using blocks allows for the development of sophisticated symbolic play. The usage of individual blocks as symbols is possible, but when utilised in a structure, a single block may stand in for a doorway, a bed, or a chimney. The block stays the same, but the meaning changes.

When one thing, sound, person, word, gesture, or mark stands in for another, that is what is known as a symbol. Through the use of symbols, cognition is no longer limited to the present moment but is also able to recollect the past and envision the future. Children can have many more possibilities and alternatives. The usage of symbols was crucial and significant to Froebel. As well as visual, children's ideas can be in the form of sounds, senses of touch or drama.

The use of symbols is the primary method of self-knowledge and self-education. Concepts can be expressed, considered, discussed and shared with others. The "inner," or one's own unique experience, can be made "outer" and shared with others. It can also be pondered about, modified, and commented upon. This is when changes in thinking occur. The outer becoming inner (first-hand experience).

Children are better able to transition from tangible to more abstract reasoning as their confidence with symbols grows. Becoming a symbol maker and user fosters the growth of adaptable, innovative thinking. Children that are proficient in using symbols can progress to more abstract symbolic languages like poetry, music, dance, theatre, all types of literacies and mathematical languages.



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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 need to have ownership of their play. Froebelian education values the contribution of adults offering 'freedom with guidance' to enrich play as a learning context.'

For Froebel the highest stage of childhood human development is play. This is because it is the only vehicle for the pure expression of a child's knowledge and experience. In play, free movement, free choice and self-activity are important, but they should be within a framework of guidance in which the role of the adult is crucial. Froebel believed that children should be allowed to select the activities they are capable of doing. Children should have the chance to choose and decide what they play with, practise and apply what they already know and develop ideas they can try out through play. Froebel knew that children did not simply stumble across the answer but had to find out how things operate for themselves, which is why he encouraged them to learn via experimenting; remembering what worked and what they have learnt.

Knowing a child and what matters to them the most is the first step in providing guidance. Educators who are attentive are more effective. Also, adults should be mindful that there are times when children are particularly adept at learning certain things. Play and first-hand experiences, are crucial to young children's learning. Play incorporates all learning and is a child's primary means of development, enabling them to function at their highest levels. For Froebel, children achieved freedom through their own self-activity. This leads to thinking, planning ahead, problem solving, reasoning and understanding. Froebel believed that play strengthened the motivation for self-activity. A large portion of children's self-activity is not play, such as gardening, cooking and helping adults with real duties. Play has unique properties that make it the best context for learning.





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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'.'

The care and education of young children is essential to society. Young children are entitled to knowledgeable and well-qualified educators who are deeply informed about and attuned to the distinctive nature of young children's learning and development. Froebelian educators constantly strive to develop their understanding through training, observation, research, reflection and discussion. Close, thorough observation of the young children, along with serious contemplation that results in planning, is essential to this. Froebel thought that observation without thought was "empty observation" that could never result in true comprehension. He also invented the practice of documenting significant moments in a child's development. This we know can assist educators in determining the best way to support the child.



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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.'

Froebel had observed that giving young children the chance to grow plants from seed seemed to increase their awareness of the surrounding natural environment. The children will, for instance, learn about the requirements for seeds, plants, and trees to thrive - such as water, air, and light. Also, they discover the unity and interdependence of the entire plant - its roots, stem, buds or flowers - and the sky, the earth, the air, water, light, shade, temperature and so on. Froebel believed that every child should be immersed in and with nature but also have opportunities not only to grow and care for plants but have frequent, up-close encounters with nature in order to develop an appreciation for its wonders and begin to understand how all living things are interconnected. The Froebelian nursery garden should be a rich environment with insects, pollinators, birds, habitats for life, etc, offering many flexible and open-ended resources with opportunity for learning in all areas of development.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Stella Louis is the Lead Tutor for the Froebel Trust Short Courses and delivers Froebelian training in early years settings all over the UK. She is an early years consultant and author who has worked with a vast range of nursery settings, schools, local authorities, government departments and charities.

Find out more about a Froebelian approach to early education and Froebel Trust Short Courses at froebel.org.uk

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