

# Mastering Autonomy



## OVERVIEW

Mastering Autonomy is an evidence-informed professional learning workshop exploring the fundamental need for freedom, agency and self-expression in children and young people.

Drawing on the Phoenix Cups® Framework, with a focus on the Freedom Cup®, this course supports educators to understand how autonomy underpins wellbeing, self-esteem, cognitive development, and emotional resilience. Educators are invited to adopt a needs-based perspective, recognising behaviours such as resistance or refusal as adaptive attempts to assert autonomy rather than misbehaviour, in children and young people.

We integrate theory, current research, and practical application, using real examples, including Jacob's story of spirited behaviour to explore how movement needs, sensory input, choice and agency influence behaviour and relationships. Participants examine how environments rich in creativity, exploration and whole-body learning can reduce reactive behaviours and strengthen educator relationships with children and young people.

Participants are supported to deepen their understanding of autonomy as a core human need, and to consider how Freedom Cup® filling can be intentionally supported through play, environments and educator interactions. The workshop reinforces the understanding that when autonomy is restricted, children and young people will seek it in their own ways.

## WE WILL...

- examine autonomy through the Freedom Cup®, exploring how agency, choice, creativity and freedom influence the behaviour, wellbeing and learning of children and young people.
- analyse behaviours such as resistance, refusal and avoidance, reframing them as adaptive responses to restricted autonomy, drawing on theory and real-world case examples.
- investigate practical strategies for embedding autonomy within curriculum design, including sensory-rich environments, risky play, STEAM inquiry, loose parts and autonomy-supportive interactions.
- engage in critical reflection and collaborative planning to identify intentional approaches to supporting Freedom Cup® filling through play, environments and everyday practice.

### DELIVERY MODE OFFERINGS:

- Live online webinar
- After-hours in-service workshops with teams (up to 2.5 hours)

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## PARTICIPANT OUTCOMES

By the end of this workshop, participants will possess:

1. A clear understanding of the Freedom Cup® and how autonomy, agency, choice, and creativity drive children's behaviour and wellbeing Mastering Autonomy.
2. The ability to recognise reactive behaviours as adaptive attempts to assert autonomy, and strategies to respond through connection rather than control.
3. Practical skills for designing autonomy-supportive environments, routines, and experiences that incorporate sensory development, risky play, STEAM, and open-ended materials.
4. The confidence to intentionally embed agency-rich curriculum decisions that promote children's self-esteem, social competency, and emotional growth.
5. Enhanced competence in supporting children's problem-solving, perseverance, resilience, and confidence by providing opportunities to take risks, make decisions, make mistakes, and experience success.

## THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

### **Sensory Integration Theory**

**A. Jean Ayres**

Supports the workshop's focus on whole-body movement, vestibular development, proprioception, interoception, and sensory-rich environments as essential foundations for autonomy, regulation, and competence.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

**Ryan & Deci**

Highlights autonomy as a core psychological need essential for wellbeing, motivation, and engagement. This directly underpins the Freedom Cup® focus on agency, choice, and self-governance.

### **Guidance Approach**

**Dr Louise Porter, Gordon & Campbell**

Grounds the workshop's analysis of reactive behaviours (resistance, rebellion, retaliation) as responses to adult control, and emphasises autonomy-supportive, relationship-based approaches rather than coercion.

### **Loose Parts Theory**

**Simon Nicholson**

Frames environments as catalysts for agency and creativity, enabling children to redesign, combine, manipulate, and imagine without predetermined outcomes, key features of autonomy support and Freedom Cup® filling.

## KEY LINKS – NATIONAL

### Alignment with National Quality Standard

- **QA1** – Educational Program and Practice (Elements 1.1.1, 1.2.1, 1.2.2): Strengthens intentional, responsive practices that promote children’s agency, competence, and self-directed learning.
- **QA3** – Physical Environment (Elements 3.2.1, 3.2.2): Supports the design of sensory-rich environments that foster creativity, independence, and exploration.
- **QA5** – Relationships with Children (Elements 5.1.1, 5.1.2): Enhances attuned, autonomy-supportive interactions where educators respond to children’s need for freedom without coercion.
- **QA6** – Collaborative Partnerships (Element 6.1.2): Encourages shared understanding with families around developmental needs such as autonomy, physical movement, and agency.

### Alignment with EYLF v2.0

#### Principles

- Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships: Central to understanding reactive behaviours and responding through autonomy-supportive interactions rather than control.
- High expectations and equity: Recognises each child as capable of decision-making, problem-solving, and autonomous action.

#### Practices

- Responsiveness to children: Honours children’s cues for movement, freedom, creativity, and sensory exploration.
- Learning through play: Incorporates risky play, open-ended experiences, STEAM inquiry, and loose parts as pathways to autonomy and mastery.

#### Learning Outcomes

- Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity: Autonomy and agency help children feel capable, respected, and confident.
- Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners: Promotes inquiry, persistence, creativity, problem-solving, and decision-making.

### Alignment with MTOP v2.0

#### Principles

- Secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships: Supports autonomy-supportive relationships where educators respond to resistance through connection, respect and shared power rather than control.
- Equity, inclusion and high expectations: Affirms children and young people as capable, competent and deserving of agency, supporting equitable access to choice, autonomy and meaningful participation in learning.

#### Practices

- Collaboration with children and young people: Strengthens shared decision-making by supporting educators to work with children and young people, honouring their perspectives, choices and autonomy in everyday experiences.
- Play, leisure and intentionality: Promotes intentional, autonomy-supportive play and leisure experiences, including risky play and open-ended exploration, as pathways to agency, mastery and wellbeing.

#### Outcomes

- Children and young people have a strong sense of identity: Supports identity development by fostering autonomy, self-belief and a sense of capability through choice, influence and respect.
- Outcome 4: Children and young people are confident and involved learners: Encourages curiosity, persistence and problem-solving by embedding agency-rich experiences that invite decision-making, challenge and exploration.

## KEY LINKS – NATIONAL CONTINUED

### Alignment with Australian Professional Standards for Teachers

- **Standard 1.1:** Physical, social and intellectual development: Deepens knowledge of how autonomy, sensory needs, and agency contribute to behavioural, emotional, and cognitive growth.
- **Standard 1.2:** Know learners and how they learn: Strengthens capacity to identify autonomy needs and respond with developmentally appropriate, freedom-supportive strategies.
- **Standard 3.2:** Plan, structure and sequence learning: Supports educators to design spaces and routines that foster independence, decision-making, and purposeful engagement.
- **Standard 4.1:** Support student participation: Builds confidence in creating inclusive, agency-rich learning spaces where all children can participate meaningfully.

### Alignment with National Principles for Child Safe Organisations

- **Principle 1** – Child safety and wellbeing are embedded in organisational leadership, governance and culture: Promotes environments where children's rights to agency, participation, and decision-making are upheld.
- **Principle 2** – Children are empowered and participate in decisions affecting them: Aligns with giving children meaningful choice, voice, and autonomy in daily experiences.
- **Principle 3** – Families and communities are informed and involved: Supports shared understanding of risky play, freedom, sensory development, and competence needs.
- **Principle 10** – Policies and procedures document how the organisation is safe for children: Informs autonomy-supportive practices that reduce coercion and increase relational safety.

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## KEY LINKS - QLD

### Alignment with the Kindy Uplift Key Priority Areas

#### **Culturally Safe, Inclusive & Responsive Programs**

- Encourages sensory-rich, open-ended, and agency-based experiences accessible to all learners.

#### **Social & Emotional Learning**

- Strengthens resilience through risk-taking, perseverance, problem-solving, and making mistakes safely.
- Builds self-esteem, emotional competence, and autonomy by supporting children's decision-making and sense of control.

#### **Physicality**

- Promotes whole-body movement, strength, vestibular development, proprioception, and sensory integration as essential to autonomy.
- Encourages outdoor play, risky play, active exploration, and physical challenge.

#### **Executive Function**

- Enhances planning, decision-making, problem-solving and impulse control through open-ended and autonomy-rich play.
- Strengthens cognitive flexibility and persistence through STEAM, loose parts, and exploratory learning.

#### **Language & Literacy**

- Stimulates rich communication through discussions, decision-making, negotiation, problem-solving, and explaining ideas in STEAM and play.
- Encourages expressive language through creative, open-ended, and imaginative experiences.

### Alignment with QKLG

#### **Identity**

- Builds children's sense of capability and confidence by supporting autonomy, agency, and decision-making.
- Strengthens self-esteem and self-belief through competence-building, risk-taking, and meaningful responsibility.

#### **Connectedness**

- Encourages collaborative, imaginative play and social learning that builds empathy, cooperation, and shared problem-solving.
- Supports inclusive participation through flexible environments that honour individual needs.

#### **Wellbeing**

- Deepens educator understanding of sensory needs, emotions, risk-taking, and behaviour as communication.
- Fosters resilience, self-regulation, and confidence through movement, freedom, and mastery experiences.

#### **Active Learning**

- Promotes inquiry, curiosity, experimentation, persistence and creativity through STEAM, loose parts, and risky play.
- Encourages children to solve problems, make decisions, and explore open-ended challenges.

#### **Communicating**

- Enhances expressive and receptive communication through negotiation, explaining thinking, collaborative design, and imaginative play.
- Encourages children to articulate ideas, reflect, hypothesise, and share discoveries.

## KEY LINKS – VIC

### School Readiness Funding Menu

Please note this workshop is not on the SRF menu. It can however be utilised under flexible funding provisions. For more information on flexible funding go to the Victorian Department of Education website here:



For more information on the Phoenix Support SRF offerings, including those on the menu as well as flexible funding options, head to our website here:



### Alignment with the SRF Priority Areas for use under Flexible Funding Options

#### Access & Inclusion

- Promotes inclusive practices by reducing control-based barriers and increasing flexible, agency-rich experiences.

#### Communication (language, literacy and numeracy)

- Supports children to express choices, negotiate roles, discuss ideas, reflect on processes, and articulate plans during STEAM and open-ended play.

#### Wellbeing (Social & Emotional)

- Builds emotional resilience, confidence, and self-regulation through autonomy, mastery, and competence experiences.
- Reduces reactive behaviours by proactively meeting children's Freedom Cup® needs for control, agency, and independence.

### Alignment with the VEYLDF

#### Outcome 1: Identity

- Builds reflective, intentional environments where children feel capable, respected, and valued as decision-makers.
- Strengthens self-esteem and autonomy by supporting children to take risks, try new things, and persevere.

#### Outcome 2: Community

- Encourages collaborative play, social problem-solving, and group decision-making that builds belonging and participation.

#### Outcome 3: Wellbeing

- Strengthens autonomy, self-regulation, and confidence through open-ended learning and supportive relationships.

#### Outcome 4: Learning

- Promotes inquiry, creativity, experimentation, and risk-taking through STEAM and loose parts play.
- Builds persistence, problem-solving and executive function skills through autonomy-rich experiences.