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Listening to childhood: How understanding listening supports a child's self-organisation in a complex social world

ABSTRACT

Listening to childhood: How understanding listening supports a child's self-organisation in a complex social world

The article explores the issue of self-organization in preschool-aged children as a key developmental competence influencing the functioning of cognitive, emotional, social, and executive domains. It presents the multidimensional nature of self-organisation, considering sensory preferences, thinking styles, personality types, and gender differences. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of empathetic and understanding listening as a foundation for effectively supporting the child's individual organisational style. The author argues that attentive and empathetic communication between adults and children not only fosters autonomy and essential life skills but also builds trust and contributes to long-term psychological well-being. Recognising and respecting the individual developmental needs of children is presented as a prerequisite for creating educational and caregiving environments that support holistic development.

KEYWORDS: children's self-organisation, understanding listening, child autonomy, individualised education

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A child cannot comprehend why the same beloved mother who is so worried about the lightest runny nose, cooks deliciously and helps with commitment, sometimes fails to show understanding of his inner world (Alice Miller, 2008).

Modern childhood functions in paradox — on the one hand idealised and surrounded by worship, on the other — neglected and quickly abandoned. In this context, two extreme adult attitudes emerge: some children drown in an excess of stimuli, responsibilities and toys, while others — deprived of attention and support — are trying to cope with the surrounding world on their own. It is increasingly rare to find adults who find time to genuinely listen to the child — to his needs, emotions and dreams. Instead of conversation and attentive presence, there is control, overprotection or, on the contrary, indifference. Meanwhile, it is listening, understood as openness to the other person, that is the basis for building relationships and an environment that supports development.

The complexity of the modern world poses many challenges for children. For them to find their way in it, they need not only rules and structure, but also space for self-expression and a sense of being heard. It is through dialogue that it becomes possible to jointly develop systems of organisation that are compatible with the child's individual style — his temperament, sensitivity and rhythm

of life. Parents and teachers should therefore not so much impose solutions as accompany children in their search. This is helped by attentive listening — the kind that allows one to understand the causes of a child's distraction, messiness, or withdrawal. By supporting a child in learning to plan and self-organise, adults build a sense of security, agency, and belonging. It is not the pile of boxes of memorabilia that proves the value of childhood, but everyday life filled with tenderness, attention and conversation. Home and kindergarten can be places that, by listening to the child, become a source of inspiration, motivation and balance. True listening is an act of caring — it is seeing the child in his or her uniqueness. It is also the basis for parenting in a changing world that requires us not only to act quickly, but also to have a deep understanding of the other person.

This study is based on a literature review and an analysis of recent research findings, providing both theoretical insights and practical implications.

The concept of self-organisation

According to Susan Kovolik and Karen Olsen, self-organisation is "planning, arranging, storing things in an orderly fashion and ready for use." (Kovolik & Olsen, 1994) This definition stems from the fact that children want their parents and teachers to be satisfied with them. They want to exemplarily fulfil the responsibilities with which they are charged. Self-organisation not only teaches responsibility and cooperation but also strengthens the child's sense of competence, self-respect and independence. Self-organisation is meant to help lead a better, easier, and more informed life. It teaches tolerance towards other ways of thinking and, consequently, for another way of life. Being aware of his own value, his own abilities and his own needs, the child lives a full life in a conscious and successful way. Adults must learn how to spot and nurture a child's innate talents so that years later they can watch with joy as happiness and a positive attitude towards the world emanate from him. It seems legitimate here to quote the words of John F. Kennedy: "Each of us has different talents, but we should all have the same opportunities to develop them." (JFK, 1960) This is what self-organisation is for. Self-organisation, understood as the conscious shaping of space and daily habits, can only develop when adults listen with attentiveness and empathy to the child's needs, abilities and rhythms — recognising his individual way of thinking, acting and experiencing the world.

Components of self-organisation

Knowledge of a child's individual patterns of self-organisation enables adults—both parents and teachers—to better understand the child's personality and interpret behaviours that may seem incomprehensible in everyday observation, such as intense ruminations on the loss of seemingly insignificant objects, chronic lateness or disorganisation of personal space. Recognising these patterns makes it possible to design adequate support strategies tailored to the real needs and functioning of a particular child. However, this process requires not only observation, but above all, understanding listening, which is a prerequisite for accurately reading and interpreting children's messages, both verbal and non-verbal.

One of the key elements that determine how a child organises his environment and time is the type of his mentality. According to Stefan Szuman's (2014) approach, mentality is the totality of an individual's intellectual capabilities and the level of his mental development. This author distinguishes four basic types of mentality, of which one of the most commonly observed in the context of high levels of self-organisation is the so-called "Worker."

Mental type: "Hard worker" (mascot: penguin)

Children described as "Busy" are characterised by a high level of need for order, routine, and predictability. They prefer activities based on structure and clearly defined rules, which corresponds to the dominant activity of the left basal quadrant of the brain—the area responsible for routine and logical activities. These children exhibit a high degree of self-discipline, but need support in understanding the social and emotional aspects of interacting with peers.

Hard workers tend to prefer intellectual play over physical activities, which is reflected in their interests: collecting objects, solving logic puzzles, playing cards, or putting together models. They avoid situations with a high degree of unpredictability, such as loud parties or casual play in large groups. They derive mental comfort from having a clear plan of action and being able to complete tasks alone or in a well-ordered environment. The characteristic of the "workaholic" is a strong attachment to property and a reluctance to share it, stemming not from a lack of empathy but from a need for control and security. Excessive stimuli, multitasking and failure to follow rules by the environment

can lead to feelings of confusion, tension and withdrawal in this type of child. They are also highly sensitive to the lack of fairness and inconsistent social messages. Despite their limited flexibility in peer interactions, these children are generally sincere, loyal and committed to tasks to which they give meaning and purpose. They need a clearly defined framework for action and the ability to anticipate consequences. In their relationships with others, they often strive for order and adherence to rules, which may be perceived as a need for control, but actually stems from their natural need for structure.

From a pedagogical perspective, successfully fostering the development of a child with a "workaholic" profile requires special attention to the child's inner needs and perception of the world. An indispensable tool here is understanding listening, which allows adults not only to see patterns of behaviour, but also to interpret them correctly, considering the child's unique emotional and cognitive context. In this way, it becomes possible to create an environment that fosters both independence and a sense of security — key prerequisites for the development of the ability to self-organise.

Mental type: "Sensitive" (mascot: dog)

Children belonging to the mental type described as "sensitive" are characterised by a strong need to build emotional relationships and a sense of belonging to a group. Their cognitive functioning is dominated by the area of the right basal quadrant of the brain, which is responsible for the development of harmony, empathy, and deep connections with the environment. According to this neuropsychological profile, sensitives best develop self-organisation skills in environments that enhance interpersonal relationships and offer a sense of stability and emotional security. Children with this mental type tend to focus on the needs of others, often marginalising their own needs. They manifest a high level of emotional sensitivity and the ability to form strong bonds — both with peers and with objects that carry sentimental value. They often accumulate mementos, toys, and other objects to which they ascribe personal meaning. Removing them can cause anxiety for the child, unless they are given the opportunity to pass on these items in a way that is meaningful and emotionally acceptable to them.

In the context of play, "sensitive" children prefer activities with a high social and expressive charge, such as cooperative role-playing, dancing, singing, theatrical activities, or manual work. For them, free play is a space not only for

self-expression but also for establishing relationships and building a sense of closeness. Dialogue and the opportunity to share experiences play a special role. In families where verbal communication is not developed, children of this type often seek emotional contact outside the home environment, such as among peers, teachers, or other adults showing interest in their inner world.

Sensitive children value social toys, such as plush mascots, dolls or board games, that promote the simulation of interpersonal relationships. They can play out scenarios involving toys for hours, creating story structures that meet their current emotional needs. Equally important to them as objects are the people — both real and symbolic — around whom they organise their world.

From a pedagogical and educational perspective, children with a "sensitive" profile require special attention in terms of emotional security and relationship quality. Their self-organisational development proceeds most effectively when adults not only provide them with structures and tools for organising the world but also demonstrate understanding listening — open, empathetic and without disturbing the child's delicate emotional balance. Only in an atmosphere of trust and attentiveness do sensitives learn not only to manage space and time but also to regulate emotions and consciously form social relationships.

Mental type: "Visionary" (mascot: horse)

Children representing the "visionary" type are characterised by a high level of creativity, spontaneity, and the need for autonomy and freedom of expression. Their cognitive functioning is dominated by the activity of the right frontal quadrant of the brain, which is responsible for the ability to anticipate, spatial imagination and initiate change. Visionaries manifest a difficulty in conforming to rigid schemes and routines; they prefer flexible, non-structured forms of organisation that enable them to act in accordance with their inner dynamics and creative impulse. The characteristic of children of this type is a strong connection between thinking and visual perception — they need to have all objects of importance to them in sight, according to the principle that what is invisible ceases to function in their consciousness. They eagerly engage in artistic, spatial, and manual activities, such as drawing, building, and creating fictional stories. Their high aesthetic sensitivity and need for individuality mean that their play and learning spaces are often improvised, but consistent with their personal style.

Visionaries are prone to frequent changes of interest — they engage intensely but briefly. Their cognitive development is largely through intuition and

experience. In relationships with peers, they are sometimes misunderstood — on the one hand, they attract attention with their originality, humour and ingenuity; on the other hand, they may manifest a lack of sensitivity to group needs and rules, due to their strong focus on their own inner world. They need an environment that not only does not stifle their natural expression, but also supports the development of social competence through understanding listening — adults should interpret their unconventional behaviour with care, recognising their potential instead of imposing normative patterns. Visionaries prove themselves as initiators and creators, but require empathetic accompaniment in the process of self-organisation — not by imposing rules, but by creating space for exploration and reflection. Understanding listening plays a key role in building a relationship based on trust and acceptance of the child's individuality.

Mental type: "Strategist" (mascot: lion)

Children with the "strategist" profile exhibit high goal orientation, logical thinking, and the need to control their environment. They prefer to use the left frontal quadrant of the brain, which is responsible for planning, analysis, decision-making and effective implementation of the intended actions. They tend to dominate a group, take initiative and organise activities around clearly defined tasks and goals. Strategists function well in an environment with minimal but clear structure. They like to take on challenges and take an active role in organising daily activities, such as planning the course of play, managing group tasks, or organising family activities. They are eager to engage in games of logic, construction and competition, where they can demonstrate their knowledge, agility and decision-making skills. Their approach to play is often characterised by the need to compete and achieve success, which can lead to an excessive focus on the outcome at the expense of relationships with peers.

In social interactions, these children do not always recognise subtle nonverbal signals, and their communication style can sometimes be directive. They choose some play partners with whom they can perform their plans and who accept their dominant position. In conflict situations, they may show low empathy, which requires special work on the part of adults to develop emotional-social competence.

For effective support of strategists, it is essential to combine a clear framework for action with elements of understanding listening — these children need to feel that their need for control and agency is noticed and respected, but

at the same time they learn that effective leadership requires sensitivity to others. Therefore, the role of adults is to support them in developing not only organisational skills, but also the ability to dialogue, compromise and respond empathetically to the needs of those around them.

A child's mental type can be determined using Lanna Nakone's *What is your child's thinking style?* test (Nakone, 2005).

The diversity of children's mindsets — both in terms of their dominant cognitive functions and individual preferences in organising action-points, reflects the need for flexible yet intentional educational strategies. Each of the four identified types — "Hard Worker," "Sensitive," "Visionary," and "Strategist" — reveals a unique way of perceiving the world, forming relationships, and engaging in activities. This means that effective developmental support, including the ability to self-organise, cannot rely on uniform methods. Instead, it must consider the internal logic of each child's functioning.

In this context, a key competence for adults — whether teachers or parents — is attuned listening. This does not mean passively receiving the child's messages. Rather, it is an active cognitive and emotional process aimed at deeply understanding the meanings a child assigns to their experiences, behaviours, and needs.

Only through attentive, empathetic listening can we identify the true sources of a child's organisational strategies — whether it be the need for structure and stability (as seen in the "Hard Worker"), closeness and relationships (in the "Sensitive"), creative freedom (in the "Visionary"), or control and efficiency (in the "Strategist"). Attuned listening creates the conditions for the adult not to impose ready-made solutions, but to co-create, with the child, a personalised life management system aligned with their cognitive and emotional style.

Only within this dialogical model is education based on mutual respect possible. It supports autonomy, self-worth, and relational safety. Despite the challenges of modern childhood — often overloaded with stimuli, demands, and achievement pressure — attuned listening is not a luxury, but a necessity for building a nurturing developmental environment. It is also a diagnostic and supportive tool: it enables adults to discover, accompany, and guide rather than judge, correct, or reshape.

A child's model of self-organisation and their ability to effectively manage their environment largely depend on their individual sensory preferences. The manner in which a child receives, processes, and interprets external stimuli significantly affects all areas of functioning, including the development of organisational competencies. Research literature emphasises that around the age

of five or six, one of the brain-registered senses — visual, auditory, or kinesthetic — tends to become dominant, thus forming the child's primary perceptual channel (Nakone, 2005).

According to estimates, approximately 60% of the population prefer the visual channel, 20% the auditory channel, and another 20% the kinesthetic channel. Importantly, gender-related differences have also been observed — most boys tend to prefer visual processing, whereas girls are more likely to show auditory dominance. Identifying the dominant sensory channel allows for creating a more accessible, supportive, and effective developmental environment. Such tailored environments promote not only learning processes but also the formation of individual strategies for self-organisation.

Children with visual sensory preference

Children with a dominant visual sense perceive their surroundings primarily through observation. They are particularly sensitive to colours, shapes, and the aesthetic qualities of objects. These children absorb information most effectively when it is presented visually — through illustrations or demonstrations of actions. Their everyday language often includes visual metaphors (e.g., "let's look at this," "now I see your point").

A visually organised environment — featuring colour-coded containers, clear spatial layouts, and visually pleasing colors, supports their sense of security and operational efficiency. For children with this sensory preference, it is essential to design spaces that align with their need for visual orientation. Organisational tasks such as sorting items, planning room layouts, or designing their own labels serve not only as learning opportunities but also as a source of enjoyment. Colour, as a stimulating visual cue, can influence both the concentration and emotional well-being of visually oriented children.

Children with an auditory sensory preference

Auditory-oriented children exhibit high sensitivity to sounds, both in terms of content and acoustic features such as volume, timbre, rhythm, and intonation. They process information most effectively through listening to explanations and engaging in conversations, rather than through observation or independent action. These children thrive in environments where verbal communication is well-developed and activities are based on dialogue.

Auditory learners prefer settings that allow them to engage in conversations, participate in discussions, listen to stories, and comment on events. Their heightened sensitivity to sound stimuli can serve as both a source of motivation and a potential distraction; some children function better in silence, while others require background noise (e.g., music) to maintain concentration. In both educational and home environments, organising spaces for auditory children requires attention to acoustic comfort and opportunities for verbal expression.

Children with a kinesthetic sensory preference

Kinesthetic children acquire information through action, touch, movement, and sensory experiences involving the body. A fundamental aspect of their functioning is the need for physical comfort and direct engagement with educational materials. They often prefer toys with pleasant textures, food at appropriate temperatures, and activities that involve motion and manual manipulation.

In educational contexts, these children learn most effectively through hands-on experience: they need to touch, construct, move, or perform actions to internalise concepts. Their high sensitivity to physical stimuli can sometimes be misinterpreted as hyperactivity or difficulty concentrating, when in fact it reflects an inherent need for movement and kinesthetic involvement. These children thrive in environments that allow for mobility, hands-on tasks, and physical exploration of space.

Identifying a child's sensory preferences is a crucial component in supporting their psychosocial and educational development. It enables the adaptation of didactic and organisational methods to the child's individual learning style and mode of functioning. Particularly important in this process is the role of attentive observation and empathic listening, defined as the adult's ability to adopt the child's perspective, interpret behavioural cues, and recognise the complex system of needs, emotions, and stimuli that guide the child's actions.

Empathic listening allows for appropriate support in helping the child develop effective self-organisational strategies aligned with their unique sensory and cognitive profile. The identification of sensory preferences can be facilitated by the *What is my child's sensory preference* test, developed by Taylor (2005).

A child's personality type significantly influences the way they function in both social relationships and interactions with the physical and cognitive environment. Who the child becomes, how they form relationships with others,

how they respond to their surroundings, and how they develop self-organisational strategies largely depend on whether they exhibit predominantly extraverted, introverted, or ambiverted traits. Identifying the dominant personality characteristics allows for a more precise adaptation of the educational environment and support strategies to the child's individual needs.

Extraverted personality type

Children with an extraverted personality type exhibit a strong need for external stimulation. They often function in environments rich in sensory input, such as listening to music or having the radio or television on. They draw energy from social interactions and their surrounding objects and situations, eagerly engaging in activities with high sensory intensity. Due to their multitasking tendencies and heightened need for interaction, these children may be perceived as impulsive or easily distracted; however, such behaviours stem from a natural drive to dynamically engage with the world around them.

Extraverted children express their emotions and thoughts openly and energetically, and their mood often improves in the presence of others. A lack of social contact may lead to mood deterioration, irritability, or withdrawal. Their inclination to possess objects does not stem from low self-esteem, but rather from their mode of organising the world and constructing identity through relationships with people and things.

The introverted personality type

In contrast to extroverted individuals, introverted children derive their energy from solitude or from interactions within a small, trusted social circle. Their mode of functioning is characterised by introspection, a need to internally process ideas before verbalising them, and an increased sensitivity to excessive external stimulation. In overstimulating environments, they may experience fatigue, frustration, and a decline in task performance.

Introverted children are sometimes misperceived as withdrawn or shy; however, such behaviour typically reflects a natural need for cognitive processing and emotional restoration rather than a lack of social capacity. These children benefit significantly from environments that offer quiet, calm, and opportunities for solitary activity. Within such contexts, they demonstrate a remarkable capacity for forming deep and enduring interpersonal relationships.

A critical component of their well-being lies in the freedom to disengage from group activities without external pressure, as well as the autonomy to structure their activities in accordance with their intrinsic pace and rhythm.

The ambiverted personality type

Ambiverted children exhibit both extroverted and introverted traits, depending on the situational context, mood, or level of arousal. They function optimally under moderate levels of stimulation, capable of tolerating high sensory input for limited periods, followed by a need for recuperation. This balanced profile allows for flexible adaptation to changing environmental conditions; however, it also necessitates careful observation of the child's responses and an individualised daily rhythm that aligns with their unique needs.

Both the introverted and extroverted tendencies influence how the child learns, processes information, and organises daily activities. For instance, a child with predominantly introverted traits may require a period of rest after attending preschool before engaging in tasks such as tidying up. Conversely, a child with dominant extroverted features may thrive in contexts that promote self-expression and social interaction. Recognising these patterns enables caregivers and educators to adjust the learning and caregiving environment to match the child's sensory processing style and preferred pace of activity.

According to the literature, approximately 15% of children display strongly extroverted personality characteristics, another 15% exhibit a high degree of introversion, while the remaining 70% fall within the intermediate range, characterised predominantly by ambiversion (Nakone, 2005). For children within this majority group, fostering a balance between activity and recovery is particularly important, along with supporting their ability to manage time and energy flexibly.

Identifying a child's personality type and the associated needs for stimulation and social interaction serves as a foundation for developing individualised educational and caregiving strategies. A crucial prerequisite for the effectiveness of these strategies is *empathetic listening* — the caregiver's attentiveness to behavioural cues, openness to emotional needs, and willingness to adapt the environment in accordance with the child's evolving capacities and predispositions.

Assessment of dominant personality tendencies can be facilitated using the Arlene Taylor Child Extroversion–Introversion Assessment (Nakone, 2005).

Gender differences in the development of self-organisation competencies

In the development of self-organisation competencies, gender differences play a significant role, stemming from both biological predispositions and socio-cultural influences. Girls and boys differ in terms of brain structure and function, developmental pace, cognitive preferences, and modes of participation in social relationships. These divergent developmental pathways, characteristic of each gender, should be acknowledged and respected from the earliest stages of education to avoid misinterpretations of children's behaviours and the resulting educational conflicts.

Neuropsychological studies show that differences in hemispheric brain development are already evident during the prenatal stage; girls tend to exhibit earlier development of the left hemisphere, which is primarily responsible for language functions, while boys show faster development of the right hemisphere, which is associated with spatial orientation and strategic thinking. Furthermore, the corpus callosum — the structure connecting the two hemispheres — is generally thicker in girls, facilitating more integrated information processing and divided attention. Girls more often engage in conversations, form social bonds, and participate in activities grounded in empathy and communication. In contrast, boys demonstrated a greater need for physical exploration and interaction with their environment.

In terms of self-organisation, girls were more likely to display emotional involvement in organising and storing objects. They also tended to plan ahead and exhibit higher levels of self-discipline in completing tasks. Boys, on the other hand, often require a more external support in structuring their activities. They respond more positively to specific, short-term goals, and their motivation tends to increase in the presence of an adult or peer. From a neuropsychological perspective, boys more frequently employ lateralised thinking focused on goal attainment, whereas girls are more inclined towards long-term planning and global thinking.

Although these differences are statistically supported, they should not lead to oversimplified generalisations. Every child possesses a unique style of self-organisation shaped by the interaction of biological predispositions, the educational environment, and the individual personality profile. The role of

adults — both parents and educators — is not to impose universal behavioural frameworks but to engage in *empathetic listening*: recognising, accepting, and supporting children's needs regardless of gender, through a presence grounded in empathy and a willingness to revise one's own expectations for the sake of the child's well-being.

Empathic listening as a foundation for developmentally attuned educational practice

Empathic listening, understood as a relationally rooted process, enables adults to move beyond their own habitual patterns and behavioural frameworks to attentively attune to the unique developmental rhythm of the child. Gaining insight into the child's dominant personality traits, sensory preferences, learning style, and responses to environmental stimuli facilitates the construction of an educational environment that not only supports self-organisation, but also reinforces the child's sense of identity, agency, and emotional security.

The practical application of this knowledge in educational and caregiving contexts allows for more precise modulation of environmental stimulation, more appropriately tailored support strategies, and the development of the child's individual potential in a balanced and sustainable manner. Only when the adult is capable of listening to the child with genuine attentiveness — perceiving their needs, emotions, and ways of structuring experience — can conditions be created for the child's full and harmonious development.

Conclusions

Self-organisation constitutes a fundamental developmental competence in preschool-aged children, encompassing action planning, time and space management, as well as the development of autonomy, responsibility, and social relationships. This period is characterised by particularly intense physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development; therefore, introducing children to structured forms of activity yields tangible benefits, both for their daily functioning and in the long-term preparation for adult life.

The early formation of self-organisational skills supports the development of planning and anticipation abilities, teaches children to allocate time for play,

learning, and rest, and introduces them to routines and tasks requiring independence. Importantly, these competencies contribute to the development of a sense of agency — children who are empowered to make decisions and manage their own activities tend to develop a stronger sense of control over their lives, thereby enhancing their self-confidence and intrinsic motivation to act.

At the same time, self-organisation does not operate solely on the individual level. Within the context of preschool groups, children learn to cooperate, share tasks, negotiate roles, and make joint decisions. Such experiences foster the development of social competencies, teaching responsible group participation and communication rooted in empathy and collaboration.

Self-organisation also plays a significant role in cognitive development. It facilitates logical, critical, and causal thinking while also supporting creativity. Activities such as planning block constructions, organising play spaces, or structuring their own day using simple tools (e.g., task cards) stimulate children's imagination, teach strategic thinking, and promote experiential learning.

However, a child's full engagement in the process of self-organisation is possible only when parents and educators practice empathic listening — a stance involving active, empathetic, and non-impositional reception of the child's needs, ways of thinking, preferences, and emotions. It is empathic listening that allows adults to relinquish their own expectations in favour of truly supporting the child's individual organisational style — regardless of personality type, sensory preferences, or gender differences.

Empathic listening is not only essential to effectively accompany the child in their development, but it also forms the basis of a relationship built on trust, security, and the nurturing of independence. A child who feels heard begins to hear themselves more clearly — their needs, their pace of action, and the goals they are striving towards. In this way, the child acquires the ability to consciously structure their own emotional and physical reality.

By supporting children in acquiring self-organisational competencies through attentiveness, dialogue, and empathetic presence, parents and educators invest in the development of independence, maturity, and adaptive capacity. Thus, they prepare children not only for effective participation in educational environments, but more importantly, for responsible, reflective, and engaged participation in social life.

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