

# Practice Guideline

## Diversity and Culture

Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) respond to the uniqueness of individuals and groups of children. They identify appropriate strategies, access the necessary resources and design curriculum to ensure full participation of all children, taking into account ability, cultural and linguistic diversity and Indigenous identity. They provide all children with opportunities for engagement, exploration and expression.

- Standard II: C.4, Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2017

The *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (Code and Standards) demonstrates “a respect for diversity and a sensitivity to the multicultural character of the Province” (*Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007*). It outlines the profession’s core beliefs and values that are care, respect, trust and integrity. All RECEs are responsible for upholding them to guide their professional practice and conduct.

More attention is being placed on becoming aware of and understanding what diversity and culture mean in theory and professional practice. Learning on this topic includes ongoing self-reflection and collaboration with others to become aware of the cultural differences and similarities among individuals and groups of people. This resource is designed to help you co-create welcoming and supportive environments with children, families and colleagues from various communities, nations, cultures, backgrounds and social structures that may differ from your own.

### You can use this resource to help you learn about:

- the importance of reflecting on your beliefs and bias, and to consider how they influence practice;
- ways to build relationships and communicate across differences;
- how to co-create culturally responsive, inclusive learning environments that embed diverse perspectives; and,
- the significance of leadership in inclusive practice and policy development and review.



Figure 1: Educator with a group of children outdoors

## About this Publication

Practice guidelines communicate certain expectations of Registered Early Childhood Educators as outlined in the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice. Guidelines also highlight how those expectations may be applied in practice. They include recommendations and provide opportunities for self-reflection and professional learning. The Code and Standards, current research and related legislation should be consulted when considering practice guidelines. Practice guidelines support the College's role to promote high standards and continuous professional learning and to govern the conduct of RECEs.

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## Suggestions for using the Practice Guideline:

- Take your time to review the material and additional resources.
- Focus on areas that are most relevant to your current practice or sections that challenge you.
- Engage in collaborative enquiry and critical reflection during a staff or team meeting, or share in a community of practice.
- Actively engage in collaborative discussions to reflect on, challenge and question the complexities of practice.
- Use this resource to support you with your related Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) portfolio goals and activities.

## What are diversity and culture?

Diversity and culture can be defined in many different ways in various documents by different cultural groups and organizations. For consistency, this resource will draw on the definitions found in the Code and Standards which states:

**Diversity** is the difference and uniqueness that each person brings to the early-years setting.

**Culture** is the understanding, pattern of behaviour, practices and values that a group of people share.

The Code of Ethics says that RECEs recognize the uniqueness and diversity of children and families. They respect each child's potential and develop and maintain responsive relationships with children and their families. RECEs provide them with meaningful opportunities to engage in and contribute to the learning environment. As an RECE, you also establish positive, collaborative relationships with your colleagues by demonstrating respect, trust and integrity.

To truly appreciate diverse cultures, you need to develop an understanding that people come from and have multiple social identities and different values and ways of knowing and being in the world (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013).

Children, families and staff in early years settings are diverse in many ways. Some will identify as belonging to one or more cultural groups. Cultural groups can be made up of people from a particular religion, race or country of origin, but cultural groups are also formed by members of communities who share gender identity, interests, language, life experiences, family structure, trauma, disability, sexual orientation or socio-economic status, to name a few.

Members of a cultural group share similar beliefs, values, practices and experiences yet individuals within these same groups are diverse. With this in mind, RECEs, in addition to the children, families and the professionals they work with, will belong to different cultural and social groups, and hold a wide range of beliefs, values, practices and experiences.

All RECEs are as unique as the children, families and colleagues with whom they work.

*In this practice guideline, the learning community consists of children, families and colleagues.*

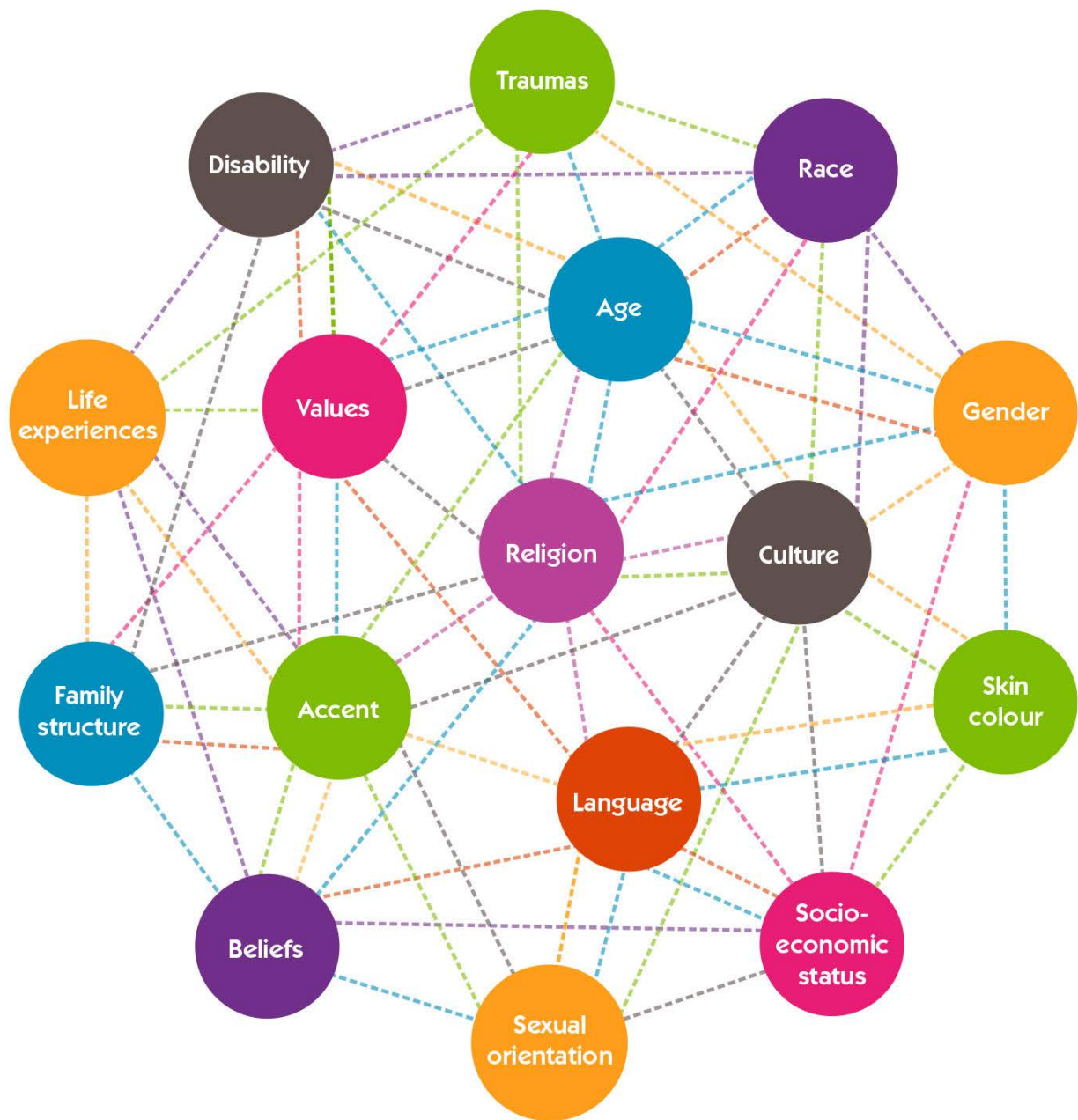


Figure 2: Visible and invisible aspects of diversity

Here are some examples of the diverse cultural contexts of individuals and families:

A parent in your learning environment moved from Quebec to live in Ontario. He is bilingual in French and English and teaches in a French-language school board. He is a single parent, raising his son on his own. While his family visits from Quebec twice a year, he now considers his friends his primary support system.

A school-age child in your practice setting was raised in an adoptive family who recently helped him reconnect with his mother, an Inuk woman. The child is learning to speak Inuktitut through Elders in the birth mother's community. He is interested in sharing what he is learning about his heritage and language with the other children at school.

A couple consists of one parent who emigrated from Europe to study and live in Canada, and the other parent who has lived in Canada their entire life. They're an interracial, same-sex couple with two adopted, school-age children. They receive financial assistance to support their education and child care expenses.

A family in your practice setting is wealthy and highly educated. They've just arrived in Canada from South America. One parent is recovering from an addiction and is guided by their spiritual principles while the other parent is religious and working in a well-established career. They have a caregiver for their child who has a disability.

A colleague speaks Arabic, French and some English. She is Muslim and lives in a family structure that includes her parents, siblings and other extended family members. She was educated abroad but is having difficulty finding full-time work in Ontario. While she works part time as an assistant in a child care centre, she has signed up for language classes to support her in securing a full-time job.

A child in your practice setting currently spends weekends with her father and lives with her mother during the week. The parents are going through a divorce and determining custody arrangements. Right now, the child has a different last name than her mother who is planning on legally changing the child's last name to match her own.



### Pause and Reflect

The practice of self-reflection is important as you develop, deepen and maintain trusting, respectful relationships with diverse peoples and communities. Consider the examples above. Think about the multi-dimensional aspects of diversity and culture and how they influence the practice setting you work in. To give you insights into your own social identity, think about the various things that make you or your family unique. Think about how visible and invisible aspects of your own diversity and culture shape your practice.

## Learning about diversity and culture

Engaging in ongoing professional learning is part of the culture of the profession. As regulated professionals, you take responsibility for your own continuous learning. You learn about diversity and unique cultural views because they influence the following practice areas:

- Professional relationships
- Equity and inclusion
- Professionalism and leadership
- The roles of the learning community
- Health and nutrition
- Languages
- Behaviour guidance
- Teaching and learning
- Child development
- Play and enquiry-based learning
- Curriculum and pedagogy



Figure 3: Four children playing with bubbles

*Cultural competence* training supports professionals in a variety of fields. The purpose of this training is to deepen a professional's awareness and understanding of the different cultural beliefs and values of the people they work with. Cultural competence is understood as the ability to think, feel and act in a manner that acknowledges and respects ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity (Cameron and Macdonald, 2015).

Some research suggests that the term “cultural competence” could imply that a professional becomes culturally competent by completing a workshop or course. However, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)’s [\*Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education Position Statement \(2019\)\*](#) indicates that understanding culture is not a one-time matter of acquiring a comprehensive understanding about all cultural customs and practices; it’s an enduring professional responsibility to learn about and continually reflect on your experiences with children, families, colleagues and other professionals.

The term “cultural humility” more accurately describes a professional’s commitment to lifelong learning about diverse and changing cultures and peoples. The First Nations Health Authority describes cultural humility as a process of self-reflection that uncovers both personal and complex systemic biases. It involves respectfully acknowledging oneself as a learner when it comes to knowing and being aware that one will never become fully culturally competent. Ongoing learning is grounded in the idea that you will never entirely know what it is like to walk in another person’s shoes.

Cultural humility also suggests that while your personal beliefs are important to you, others may place value on different ways of knowing and being, and these are by no means less significant. RECEs consider the perspectives and ideas of others. Developing cultural humility and reflecting on the multi-dimensional aspect of culture will help you co-create social and physical environments where diverse members of the learning community feel included, safe, respected and valued.

Learning about diversity and culture is ongoing because circumstances for children, families, colleagues and communities change over time. Languages are lost and acquired. Social conditions shift and family structures and situations evolve. RECEs are advocates who support members of the community as they seek to cultivate their identities. As a leader, you can support the development of language and culture through authentic continuous learning that guides the evolution and adaptation of your practice rather than defaulting to more comfortable or familiar practices.

### **Pause and Reflect**

Think about the ways that diversity and culture influence different communities and individuals. Consider some of the following:

- How your own culture shaped your personal beliefs and biases;
- Social norms may knowingly or unknowingly be reflected in the learning environment (i.e., gender-stereotyped, racial, colonial or religious messages);
- Your position in society (i.e., the barriers and advantages you have);
- Issues and inequities that people in different communities face;
- Family engagement: learn about the families’ unique interests, strengths and challenges; and,
- Current legislation, evidence-informed research and information about the profession and political changes that impact the sector or certain communities.



## Indigenous peoples in Canada

“Indigenous” and “Aboriginal” are terms used to describe First Nations, Métis and Inuit in Canada. Both are used internationally to define the original habitants of colonized countries, with Indigenous being the most favoured term. When referring to Indigenous peoples, best practice is to use the specific name of the Nation to which you’re referring. If an Indigenous person identifies themselves in a particular way, it’s respectful to echo that term as well ([Indigenous Ally Toolkit, 2019](#)).

The Code of Ethics says that RECEs respect and nurture children’s first language and/or traditional language and culture. RECEs demonstrate a commitment to learn about and address the unique rights and needs of Indigenous children and their families. They respect each child’s uniqueness, dignity and potential.

Canada’s history has and continues to affect Indigenous Peoples, communities, cultures, families and languages. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) outlines Canada’s history and its relationship with Indigenous peoples. The TRC says that reconciliation will take time. It requires ongoing public education and discussion about Indigenous rights and the culturally genocidal legacy of Canada’s residential school systems. The TRC defines cultural genocide as the destruction of all structures and practices that allow a group to continue to live and function as a group.

It is important to understand our Canadian history. The TRC calls for action to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs for Indigenous families. Until this right is fully realized, RECEs can learn about meaningful ways to reflect Indigenous perspectives and other worldviews into the learning environment. To support children and families, RECEs need to develop an awareness of the contributions of Indigenous peoples to their understandings of teaching and learning in addition to the existing systemic barriers that many face today.

While positive changes are being made, Indigenous peoples are still discriminated against. Read and familiarize yourself with Canada’s [Executive Summary of the Truth and Reconciliation Report](#).

## Reflecting on beliefs and bias

Critical reflection requires RECEs to consider and challenge their beliefs, assumptions and understandings. Beliefs, assumptions and understandings frame how RECEs view and respond to children and shape the learning experiences they make available. It involves the active process of engaging with difficult concepts, tensions and uncertainties, and changing your practice as a result (*Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice, 2017*).

RECEs work in diverse cultural contexts. Therefore, it's important to consider the origin of personal beliefs and associated biases, and the ways they influence professional practice. Also consider how personal beliefs influence relationships with members of the learning community.

NAEYC (2020) explains that people's values, beliefs and views about topics such as gender roles, family structures, apparel, foods, customs, disability, foster care, addiction, child-rearing expectations or children's behaviour are formed and reinforced through socializing with family in childhood.

Society, in both subtle and obvious ways, creates and communicates certain ideas about individuals and groups. In early childhood, people internalize the messages and attitudes constructed in society. When these messages are absorbed, they cultivate conscious and unconscious biases that can influence your professional practice, decision-making and professional judgment. The messages you convey can impact children's and family's experiences because your unconscious and conscious biases influence the way you view, talk about and respond to social differences.

Your personal values and beliefs are powerful filters that shape how you perceive the world, yourself and others. If your professional practice is unknowingly shaped by stereotypical ideas or biases, your ability to provide a nurturing, welcoming and supportive learning environment is hindered. Without considering how biases guide your thoughts, words, actions and professional practice, you run the risk of unintentionally harming others.

When you know what your beliefs and biases are, you can generate better-informed practices to prevent unintended messages, behaviours and acts of discrimination (Guerra & Nelson, 2009; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Thornton & Underwood, 2013; NAEYC, 2020). As a leader, you work toward eliminating biases because you understand your responsibility to uphold the values of the profession and to equitably support children and families.

The Code and Standards defines equity as a state in which personal or social circumstances are not obstacles to being included and supported to achieve equal educational outcomes and well-being among all children. Equitable learning environments recognize, value and build on the diversity of each child and family.

Everyone generates assumptions as a way of making sense of different situations, people and interactions. Assumptions are not necessarily bad; however, they're problematic if they stem from stereotypical, negative beliefs and biases about specific people and populations. Your assumptions can influence your statements and actions which may create physical or social atmospheres that hinder someone's sense of belonging or safety.



Figure 4: Educator supporting a group of children through play and learning

The assumptions that people make are often based on one or more of the following:

- Knowledge, lessons, beliefs, biases or values passed on to us by our families, community members, peers, mentors, educators or knowledge holders.
- Our past personal and professional experiences.
- What we learn about others and the world through media or other storytelling.
- Longstanding cultural norms established in society – deeply rooted ideas and biases about people and different groups that are conveyed in obvious or subtle ways.

Educators are self-reflective. They ask questions and resist drawing definitive conclusions since they know that many stories, ideas and perspectives can be “true at the same time” (Pelo and Carter, 2018, p. 116).

With colleagues, consider the following beliefs, biases and assumptions. Discuss the varying degrees and types of potential harms they may pose to any member of the learning community.

*Long hair is feminine.* As a result, an RECE assumes that boys with long hair are feminine and girls with short hair are masculine.

*A child from a same-sex family would dress in a certain way.* As a result, the child's appearance surprises an RECE.

*Children from some cultures are athletic.* As a result, an RECE is surprised to find them reading.

*Certain foods are unhealthy.* As a result, an RECE assumes that children who eat processed food have parents who lack knowledge about nutrition or don't care about their child's health.

*Children from certain cultures are smart.* As a result, the RECE gives them extra attention with reading and math.

*A child with interracial parents should look a certain way.* As a result, the RECE is confused when they meet members of the family who do not resemble one another.

*A colleague from a particular country has the wrong ideas about how children learn.* As a result, an RECE feels the need to teach them about how learning happens in Canada.

*A parent from a particular neighbourhood is wealthy.* As a result, the RECE gives preferential treatment to that parent and child.

*Sexuality is not appropriate to discuss or address with children.* As a result when a child asks a question about their body an RECE changes the subject.

*Some religious symbols and apparel are oppressive.* As a result, the RECE feels uncomfortable communicating with parents and colleagues who wear them.

*Families with nannies are disengaged from their children's lives.* As a result, the RECE may not find ways to include the family in the program.

*Real families consist of a mother and a father with children of their own.* As a result, an RECE considers alternative family structures unusual or unnatural.

*Children from families with a lower socio-economic status aren't as smart.* As a result, an RECE doesn't actively support the children's learning and the family's involvement.

*It is challenging to communicate with children living with disabilities.* As a result, an RECE assumes the children's actions and behaviours are problematic.

*Loud helicopters are exciting!* As a result an RECE calls attention to a soaring helicopter without realizing it might remind someone of a traumatic experience or exclude a child with a hearing impairment.

*Children enrolled in French-language programs speak French.* As a result, an RECE becomes frustrated when children are enrolled who don't speak French and does not find other ways to communicate with them.

RECEs use their professional judgment to make daily, on-the-spot decisions to support children and families. These assumptions are often based on something that has caught their attention and indicates a child needs a particular response or kind of care. Yet, if an RECE responds to a child or family without an awareness of their personal beliefs and biases, they may inadvertently treat a child or family differently because of biases or assumptions.

Regardless of where your beliefs originate, they need to be identified, considered and addressed. As a professional, it's important that you strengthen your knowledge and skills to ensure that your actions are not excluding children, families, colleagues or certain ideas, cultures and communities. Without this awareness, well-meaning professionals may unintentionally create imbalances in the learning environment, their relationships and when designing and implementing curriculum.

As an RECE, you play a vital role in the lives of children and families. Early learning and care settings are often children's first communities beyond their families. This gives you a unique opportunity to advance inclusion and equity in your practice setting.

Once you begin to recognize the often-subtle ideas and practices that privilege some and are unfair to others, you can work toward creating equitable environments in practical ways (NAEYC, 2019). You can do this by:

- critically reflecting on your practice alone or with colleagues
- considering your word choices and the language you use
- becoming aware of the people, things or situations you call attention to (e.g., who do you praise, redirect or ignore)
- reflecting on the learning materials and activities you select
- creating and adhering to workplace policies and practices that promote equity, diversity and inclusion
- enhancing the curriculum or learning environment through adaptation or by adding diverse perspectives
- holding others accountable when you witness an action that could be potentially harmful
- promoting friendships among all children
- role modelling and demonstrating dignity and respect towards all



Figure 5: Adults with children outdoors

Professional relationships with colleagues might also have an impact on RECEs' beliefs. If, for example, an RECE begins work in a new practice setting and a staff member tells them a family is disengaged, the new RECE could generate a bias about that family prior to meeting them. The perceptions of others might influence how the RECE develops a relationship with the child and family as well as their practice decisions.

### Pause and Reflect

Take a moment to engage in collaborative and self-reflection by considering the following features.

What beliefs do I have about children based on their:

- Ability or disability
- Age
- Appearance (e.g., hair, clothing)
- Characteristics, personality or preferences
- Dwelling or community
- Family structure
- Gender and gender identity
- Indigeneity
- Language
- Life experiences
- Physical, mental and emotional health
- Race
- Spirituality and religion

Consider the features listed in the column on the left with the following beliefs you may have about families and colleagues based on their:

- Education
- Employment status
- Immigration status
- Legal status
- Marital status
- Occupation
- Sexuality
- Socio-economic status



Figure 6: An educator makes notes during an independent critical reflection



Imagine a child has arrived at your practice setting with nothing to eat for lunch. You assume the child will be hungry and conclude you need to provide them with nutrition. In each of these scenarios, consider the following two responses and reflect on the ways the RECE's values, beliefs and biases may have influenced their behaviours and decisions.

Scenario 1	Scenario 2
<p>The RECE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reassures the child they will find something for them to eat;</li> <li>• Calls the parent and assures them a lunch will be offered for the child with their permission;</li> <li>• Verifies the child has no changes in their dietary restrictions or allergies and asks if the parent has other instructions;</li> <li>• Prepares a lunch for, or with, the child who eats the meal with their friends; and</li> <li>• Greet a grateful parent who arrives at pick-up time feeling supported and understood.</li> </ul>	<p>The RECE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decides the family is irresponsible;</li> <li>• Complains to other staff that the child doesn't have a lunch, telling colleagues: "The parent should be better organized. I don't have time for this."</li> <li>• Brings food for the child, sighs and says: "Make sure your mom doesn't forget your lunch tomorrow."; and</li> <li>• Ignores the parent when they arrive because the RECE feels the parent doesn't understand or listen anyway.</li> </ul>

Discuss these two scenarios with your colleagues or community of practice.

- In what ways do you think the RECE's professional judgment and reactions have been influenced by their own personal values, position in society or their beliefs and biases?
- Does the RECE have their own conscious and unconscious beliefs and bias about the family's socio-economic or marital status, sexuality, religion, language, race or any other belief?
- In these two scenarios, consider in what instances the RECE's personal judgment and values are influencing their response to the child and family.
- Ask yourself: In which scenario does the RECE appear to be acting on their personal rather than professional values and standards?
- With colleagues, discuss how both reactions either support or hinder the overall wellness of the child and family.

With your colleagues, reflect on the topics below and consider the various reactions they might provoke. Think about how an RECE might respond with their personal views and values, and how their response could change when they act on their professional values and standards.

- Breastfeeding, bottle feeding and soother use
- Sleep and toileting routines (i.e., duration, time and hygiene practices, gender of RECE)
- Eating and feeding practices (e.g., children must eat everything on the plate, level of independence)
- Year-round outdoor play and clothing
- Risky play
- Disability
- Vaccinations
- Addiction and substance abuse
- Family's legal or immigration status
- Sexual health education (i.e., responding to children's curiosity, using accurate language)
- Technology use and screen time

Remember, everyone has individual beliefs and biases of which they may or may not be aware. Beliefs and biases have the potential to influence your professional judgment and how you respond to interactions among members of the learning community.

Read the [Practice Note: Professional Judgment](#) (2018) and consider how the following key elements inform your professional judgment:

- Ethical and professional standards
- Professional knowledge and experience
- Reflective practice

When a member of the learning community is excluded due to the beliefs or attitudes conveyed in the setting, you seek the necessary resources and review and discuss diversity, equity and inclusion policies and practices with colleagues. Some situations will need to be addressed immediately with the affected people or group, whereas other situations are best handled by arranging a private meeting to discuss the matter. You have professional and ethical values that need to be upheld. Let them guide you as you consider complex situations, environments and relationships.

Read the [Practice Note: Ethical Decision-Making](#) (2019) to learn more about the steps you can take to navigate the complexities of practice and act in the best interest of all children and families.

# Developing culturally responsive relationships

Ethic B says that RECEs build and maintain responsive and collaborative relationships with families. These relationships are based on mutual trust, openness and respect for confidentiality. RECEs work in partnership with families to share knowledge and resources that support the well-being and learning of children.

To co-create culturally appropriate pedagogy, curriculum, resources, policies and programs, RECEs must be mindful of diversity and culture. One way RECEs do this is by developing and maintaining strong professional relationships.



Figure 7: Child playing with family

To build and sustain culturally responsive relationships, RECEs need to develop an awareness of the historical and present-day social and economic inequities and bias that exists for different groups. Become aware of what makes people and communities unique by developing strong, trusting professional relationships with them. Learn relevant information about someone's experiences from their perspective at a pace they're comfortable with. Recognize that some members of the learning community may not be comfortable disclosing information and details about their lives that aren't relevant to the professional context. Also, be mindful of obvious and underlying power dynamics that exist in society and be careful not to push your own beliefs on others.

Developing, strengthening and maintaining collaborative relationships is one of your main responsibilities. You understand that families are of primary importance in their children's development and well-being, and that children are best understood in the context of their families, cultures and communities (Standard I). To fulfill your professional duties, you build and maintain culturally responsive relationships with children, families and colleagues across diverse backgrounds and social contexts. You do this by considering some of the following:

- People have complex past and present lived realities, experiences and life circumstances.
- Individuals value different traditions, customs, beliefs, perspectives and knowledge.
- A child's and family's experiences with early learning services and professionals (e.g., child care, school, family support, child protective services or resource consultants).
- Varying levels of trust in others and in sharing personal information, particularly with those considered to be in authoritative roles.
- Diverse communication styles and languages.

- The family's goals and aspirations for their child(ren).
- The family's relationships with one another, their unique structure and status (e.g., socio-economic, legal, immigrant or marital).
- Scheduling events or activities, such as family meetings or field trips, outside of religious holidays, or other days of significance to the family.

Standard V says that RECEs understand the inherent imbalance of power in relationships between a professional and a child or family. They know and understand that care must be taken to ensure children and families are protected from potential abuse of an RECE's position of power during, after or related to the provision of their professional services (B.3).

Recognize that your professional and personal knowledge can influence your sense of power. This sense of power may hinder your communication with others when they share their thoughts, decisions and ideas that differ from your own. Ensure your communication is respectful and your decision-making considers others' values, experiences, perspectives and ideas.

Cultural practices, and the features that make people diverse, may or may not be visible. This means you could be unaware of the cultural groups that children, families and colleagues identify with. Without knowing members of the learning community, you make certain assumptions about them. You can't assume to know a person's socio-economic status, beliefs, capabilities, gender identity, religion or mental outlook without forming a relationship with them.

In your reciprocal and responsive relationships, you can learn about the invisible aspects of diversity and culture. Be careful not to make assumptions about:

- a child's gender identity based on the clothes they wear
- the kind of play a child likes based on their gender
- the family's country of origin based on their race
- children's capabilities based on their socio-economic status
- parents' sexual orientation based on their marital status
- a colleague's religious beliefs based on the food they eat
- single parents' past or current marital status



Figure 8: Smiling family

Standard I says that RECEs ensure the needs and best interests of the children in their care are their highest priority. RECEs access available information regarding the relevant family circumstances of children and the factors that may contribute to shaping their individual and family identity. These include, but are not limited to, the child's health, legal custody and/or guardianship, family structure and cultural and linguistic background. You obtain information while also recognizing that people have different levels of comfort around communication or disclosure. For example, a family might feel trepidation revealing certain details about themselves or their family due to fears of certain consequences or judgment and, therefore, keep specific information to themselves.

RECEs need to be knowledgeable about applicable privacy legislation and obligations, especially as they relate to different types of personal and confidential information. They need to inform families early in their relationship about the limits of confidentiality of information, including why they share relevant information with colleagues to support children's learning and development (Standard V).

RECEs establish appropriate boundaries with children and families when acquiring information that supports a child and family. Standard V says that the information RECEs share with and receive from families and colleagues must be appropriate and relevant to the professional setting and services being provided. RECEs obtain, familiarize and update themselves with available and relevant information about a child's medical condition, special needs, disability, allergy, medications and emergency contacts (Standard III). Unless the information is critical to obtain immediately to protect the child and family, RECEs learn about them at the family's comfort level and pace.

In your professional relationships within the learning community, you may also have other familial, personal or business relationships. It's important to understand that dual relationships may be understood differently across cultures and could be challenging to avoid in certain communities or locations. Depending on the community in which you live, RECEs may have a variety of roles in the community: they may be leaders in the profession or in other community organizations; they might be parents or neighbours; or they could be members of community programs designed to support specific religious, language or cultural groups that are small or closely connected.

One way you demonstrate professionalism is by informing others of the need to maintain professional boundaries. As an RECE, you understand the importance of being transparent about dual relationships and develop strategies to manage or avoid them if they pose a risk to a child or family. Read the [\*Practice Guideline: Dual Relationships\*](#) (2017) to learn more.

# Communicating across differences

RECEs know their professional relationships are grounded in effective communication that's based on mutual trust, openness and respect for confidentiality (Ethic B).

As a leader and a professional, you understand that a child's safety, health, well-being and overall development depends on strong, culturally responsive relationships that maintain open, respectful and reciprocal communication.

Be mindful of the power of communication and consider how you communicate with:

- your body language (e.g., proximity of your body, hand gestures, eye contact)
- your speaking volume, pitch, tone and speed
- the words you choose
- your emotions

Seek information, resources and current research that can help you communicate in ways that are equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity. Another essential part of communication in care-based practice is the ability to be an effective and receptive listener. You communicate in ways that are equitable, inclusive and respectful of the unique children and families you support. You offer encouragement and support by responding appropriately to the ideas, concerns and needs of children and families. You ask respectful questions at appropriate times and in appropriate places, and seek answers with others, whether they're children, families, colleagues or community members.

With colleagues, consider some factors that influence communication:

Internal factors	External factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Beliefs and biases</li><li>• Interpersonal skills</li><li>• Knowledge and life experiences</li><li>• Languages spoken / language learners</li><li>• Interpretations of ideas expressed, body language or voice tone and level</li><li>• Disabilities (visible or invisible) (e.g., deaf, blind, people with diverse mental processes and outlooks)</li><li>• Comfort level and confidence</li><li>• Cultural beliefs and practices</li><li>• Power dynamics in professional relationships</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Availability (i.e., work and family responsibilities)</li><li>• Appropriate and adequate timing</li><li>• Cultural holidays or days of significance</li><li>• Workplace limitations (e.g., environment, location, opportunities for connection or lack of privacy)</li><li>• Access to phone, email, Internet or other technological platforms</li><li>• Different schedules and routines</li><li>• A family's legal situation</li></ul>



### Pause and Reflect

Consider the members of the learning community and ask yourself:

- What are their communication preferences (e.g., email, phone call, video conference or in person, day of the week and time of day)?
- What is their familiarity with the practice setting and context (i.e., are they new Canadians? English or French-language learners)?
- Do you use phrases or acronyms that can be understood across cultures?
- Could your body language and voice be communicating something different than you intend (e.g., could your body position be viewed as a position of power)?

Be mindful of the ways your beliefs or practices can influence your professional judgment when working with members of the learning community. Families are likely to have their own diverse beliefs about how children learn and hold unique goals for their child(ren). Since families play a primary role in decision-making related to their children, families are involved in the process.

RECEs collaborate with families to access information and resources to support them in making informed decisions about their child (Standard I).

Standard IV says that RECEs are knowledgeable about policies and procedures that are relevant to their professional practice and the care and education of children. Using your professional knowledge and judgment, you can influence families when discussing practice matters. You demonstrate a respect for a family's goals, while effectively communicating the foundations of your practice, play-based pedagogy and your decision-making processes.

Since you are aware of the power dynamics that can exist in professional relationships, you are careful not to place greater value on one belief over another, unless a belief expressed has the potential to affect another person's feelings of safety. As a leader and professional, you adhere to equity, diversity and inclusion policies in the workplace, and explain the foundations of your practice to families and why you adhere to them.

Remember, some members of the learning community may feel comfortable sharing information about themselves immediately and in great detail whereas some might share bits over a period of time. Some may feel trepidation when discussing themselves and their experiences. Others might view certain details about their family life deeply personal and reserved for discussions within the home or with certain community members.

To ensure that members of the learning community feel welcome in the environment, consider some of the following points:

- Understand the power of language. Learn and use accurate language when discussing human differences. Reflect on the words you choose. Are the word choices exclusionary, stereotypical or hurtful to any particular cultural group? How do you know?
- Learn essential words, symbols or phrases in the child and family's language.
- Use visuals, artifacts or videos to showcase children's play, certain ideas or schedules.
- Find information about communicating across differences to strengthen your interpersonal skills.
- Seek opportunities to engage in social justice activities. One way you can do this is by supporting the official language of the program (i.e., speak the Indigenous language used in the program or speak French in a francophone program)
- Engage in professional discussions with a community of practice to support the development of culturally responsive communication.

Get to know different people and social groups personally. Engage in ongoing learning and connect with communities of practice who are doing inclusion and equity work. In doing so, RECEs can increasingly recognize discrimination, unfairness and develop language to describe and address it effectively while supporting children to do the same. When RECEs generate environments that value different social identities, children learn they're valued, and, in turn, they learn how to treat others with fairness and respect. As a leader, you model humility and a willingness to learn by taking responsibility for any biased actions taken, even if unintended, and actively work to repair the harm and use the opportunity to learn and reflect (NAEYC, 2019).



Figure 9: Adult engaging with school-age child

## Pause and Reflect

With colleagues, consider how you might respond in the following circumstances:

- During playtime you hear a child say to another child, “You can’t come to my party because your parents have no money for presents.”
- A parent comes to you and expresses her concern that her child may not be learning the language of the program effectively from an RECE who has a heavy accent.
- You overhear a staff person saying, “How are we supposed to relate to her? She doesn’t understand our lived experiences; she is not even from our community.”
- A colleague says to you, “Did you meet the new single mom and her son? Poor things, I wonder when she got divorced.”

It can be difficult to know how to respond to such comments that may be harmful. When someone in the learning environment’s safety is at risk, you should respond rather than stay silent for fear of saying something wrong. Ongoing learning, building authentic relationships and talking with others, (i.e., families, colleagues, knowledge keepers and members of different communities), can support you when responding to any actions, behaviours or comments that could hurt or exclude a person or group.

This process requires you to take thoughtful and constructive action. Rather than stepping in with your own plan, learn about how to support someone by asking them what they would like you to do. Make every effort to question beliefs or actions that hurt or have the potential to hurt anyone. Before responding to challenging situations, reflect on how you’re feeling. When you support people with a different identity to your own, reflect on the role you can play. Consider your emotions and your motives to ensure they’re informed, authentic and respectful.

RECEs ensure that the policies governing their practice setting promote equity, diversity and inclusion, and they ensure that they adhere to the policies. Review these policies in your workplace and consider what you could do or say if you witness someone in the learning community making negative assumptions about or discussing someone, a particular idea or a cultural practice in a negative way.



Figure 10: Educator engaged in self-reflection

# Reflecting diversity and culture in the learning environment

Equity advocate George Dei (2006) says that inclusion is not about bringing people into a space that already exists; it is about making a new space, a better space for everyone.

RECEs understand their responsibilities to design inclusive environments that provide children with opportunities for engagement, exploration and expression. Standard III says that RECEs intentionally create and maintain environments that support children's play and learning, and contribute to a sense of belonging and overall well-being. It's your responsibility to ensure the setting is accessible and physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually safe for all children and families.

RECEs reflect on their pedagogical practice and the overall program with the learning community because they understand their responsibilities to co-create programs that support children's cultures and backgrounds. RECEs also keep in mind that children learn differently and have different interests, dispositions and perspectives.

By considering multiple viewpoints, you are able to co-design programs and curricula that reflect the unique and diverse characteristics of the children and families and the community in which they live. You understand that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to curriculum development. Instead, RECEs co-design programs that reflect the abilities, cultural and linguistic backgrounds of the children and families, including those from LGBTQ2s+, diverse racial and religious groups, Indigenous and Francophone communities. Educators honour the social, cultural and linguistic diversity in the learning environment. They take each child's background and experiences into account when interpreting and responding to their ideas and choices in play, as well as their experiences, when designing learning activities (Code and Standards, 2017; How Does Learning Happen?, 2014; Kindergarten Program, 2016).



Figure 11: Educator with children playing and holding hands

It's important for children to understand they belong to many communities and that, ultimately, they are all citizens of the global community (The Kindergarten Program, 2016).

RECEs ensure learning environments reflect the diversity of the community and also of the broader world. Inclusive spaces are ones where a variety of cultural groups and communities are represented in the environment in authentic ways rather than only visible during specific holidays or celebrations.

That means diversity and culture are infused into the program by intentional professionals who understand and value equity, diversity and inclusion. Inclusive environments enhance the experiences of all members of the learning community. In these environments, children develop a sense of belonging, an appreciation of diversity and an understanding of the importance of concepts such as equity, fairness, acceptance, respect and justice.

Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education strategy focuses on respecting diversity, promoting inclusive education and identifying and eliminating discrimination. Eliminating discrimination means removing the biases, systemic barriers and power dynamics that limit the ability of children to learn, grow and contribute to society (The Kindergarten Program, 2016).

Consider diversity when you make children's learning experiences visible in the environment. You display and discuss their experiences through diverse media such as images, artifacts, different technological tools, videos, artwork, quotes, written or visual stories and other forms of storytelling. Find ways to include different cultural celebrations, activities, customs as well as other languages when using quotes and stories. Consider how to make children's learning visible in ways that are meaningful to them.

Refer to the [Practice Guideline: Pedagogical Practice](#) (2020) to learn more about ways to make children's learning visible in the learning environment.

Children and families bring diverse social, cultural and linguistic perspectives to the practice setting. *How Does Learning Happen?* (2014) says that when children's home languages and cultures are reflected in the environment it supports children's language skills and contributes to cultivating their identity and sense of themselves. It's vital that families feel a sense of belonging so they can be valuable contributors to their children's learning.



Figure 12: Child with family



Children and their families feel welcome when they sense their cultures are meaningfully embedded into the learning environment. By including children and families in the process of designing the physical and social space, their sense of belonging deepens, as do your relationships with them.

RECEs create inclusive spaces and experiences by inviting others to:

- share songs, games, dances, languages, books, stories and cultural traditions
- discuss and contribute to children's learning and play
- offer suggestions and ideas about the program, including schedules and routines
- spend time in the space developing relationships
- bring in or create different learning materials

In addition to the visible aspects of the environment, such as ensuring there are diverse images, storybooks, writing and learning materials, it's important to consider the "hidden curriculum" which refers to the unspoken, yet powerful, messages conveyed in the environment. RECEs absorb messages about what is valued in society and then, often unknowingly, create social and physical environments influenced by societal messages about what is valued and viewed as *normal*.

The *hidden curriculum* consists of verbal and non-verbal messages that are spread through dialogue, questions, images, books and other teachings, often without educators realizing it (Martin & Bobier, 2019). It's generally seen as negative because it transmits and strengthens longstanding dominant societal norms, values and beliefs that exclude or silence members of the learning community.

Examples:

- Visuals, books or learning materials in the environment present diverse cultural groups in a stereotypical way (e.g., Dutch children in wooden shoes, Japanese children in kimonos, Mexican children wearing sombreros and ponchos) or where diverse cultures are not represented at all.
- Heteronormative and stereotypical discussions related to gender roles among RECEs, and in the presence of children, about boyfriends, marriage and having babies could exclude those not wishing to be married or have children, making them feel atypical.
- The ways children are grouped. Using binary gender language – phrases like *boys* and *girls* instead of *children* might exclude and hurt a transgender child or a child who is questioning their gender identity.
- Discussions about families are centralized around the idea that families consist of two parents – a mom and a dad and their own children.



- Discussions about single parents stem from the idea they are divorced, when in fact, they may be widowed, never married nor in a committed relationship.
- Gendered discussions about play that reiterate the idea that boys like rough and tumble play, and that girls like gentle and quiet play
- Dominant gender roles are reinforced through questions such as: “Did your mom make your lunch?” or “Will your dad take you to soccer?”
- Group discussions assume that children went on a summer vacation with their family, when in fact families may not have travelled for any number of reasons.
- Discussing people and groups of people from certain cultures, others them, setting them apart from the dominant group (e.g., white, middle class, typically developing children).
- Specific items, sounds or situations may be traumatizing for members of the learning community who may have been impacted by certain sounds or situations that other children or adults barely notice.

RECEs learn about the visible and invisible aspects of culture to ensure the environment reflects the values and diversity of the community. Work toward eliminating power imbalances that the hidden curriculum creates by critically reflecting on all aspects of the program, including the language spoken, the learning materials, the layout of the space, the visuals and the choice of activities, words, requests or phrases.

The Kindergarten Program (2016) states that families should feel they belong; they’re valuable contributors to their children’s learning and deserve to be engaged in a meaningful way (p.14).

Acknowledging the contributions, challenges and celebrations of cultures and communities in curriculum content (e.g., National Indigenous Peoples Day, Black History Month, Franco-Ontarian Day or PRIDE) is positively vital. The reality that certain communities are discriminated against means it’s important to bring the issues facing various groups to the awareness of the public. Planning and implementing a cultural celebration may be seen as a measure of quality, one that suggests completion, and therefore does not need to be taken up in other areas of the curriculum. For example, by only highlighting the contributions of Black Canadians for one month a year, this practice has the potential to separate them from our shared community. If this is the attitude, RECEs run the risk of being complacent, potentially failing to find ways to incorporate the identities of Black Canadians in all other areas of the curriculum which erases their identities for the remaining eleven months.

These are the finer details that require the development of culturally humble relationships that allow members of the learning community to feel safe and valued in the setting. These practices require you to think broadly about cultural and social differences.

“All children have the right to equitable learning opportunities that enable them to achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society” (NAEYC, 2019).



Figure 13: An adult and a child lay on the floor and read a book together

### Pause and Reflect

Consider the social and physical environment at your practice setting. With colleagues, assess which cultural ideas dominate the space. By critically reflecting on the aesthetic of the learning environment and assessing the potential presence of the hidden curriculum, you can work towards eliminating any unintended actions and messages.

- Take stock of the physical, emotional, social and spiritual environment, including the hidden curriculum, learning materials and visual and verbal messages (e.g., word choices, books, dolls, images, furniture, washrooms, room layout, lighting and noise levels).
- Do the materials in the learning environment reflect the individual children and their families?
- Identify the unique characteristics and strengths of each family in the practice setting. How can you weave these into different areas of the program?
- Is the environment maintaining any ideas that exclude anyone or draw attention to them in a negative way? How can this be addressed?
- Are events and meetings scheduled so they don't conflict with any religious or other observances?
- Find ways to reflect diversity and represent culture beyond celebrations that set them apart from others.
- What messages do the policies and program statement convey? Is there an equity statement or a policy that promotes equity and inclusion?
- What else can you do to strengthen equity, diversity and inclusion or the cultural humility of the program?

# Demonstrating inclusive leadership

Standard IV says that all RECEs, regardless of position or title, are leaders.

Every RECE plays a leadership role in their community when they promote diversity, culture and inclusion in the ways highlighted in this practice guideline.

RECEs are leaders who:

- identify and address their beliefs and biases so they don't hinder their practice.
- build and sustain culturally responsive and respectful relationships that allow them to collaborate with diverse members of the learning community.
- are self-reflective, curious and active ongoing learners dedicated to the communities they serve.
- share ideas and use their professional judgment to make decisions with the best interests of the child and family in mind.
- know that inclusion and a respect for diversity and culture lies at the heart of high-quality early learning environments.



Figure 14: A diverse group of adults

RECEs engage in continuous professional learning and work toward developing their leadership skills in unique ways. The [CPL Portfolio Handbook](#) (2019) describes leadership development as the practice of engaging with colleagues to share collective knowledge and experiences to solve problems, create solutions and improve outcomes. It involves taking and encouraging collective responsibility, contributing to an inclusive and collaborative environment, and creating, coordinating and directing change through vision, inspiration, commitment and contribution.

Leadership practices that respect diversity and culture are grounded in the following:

- collaborative and self-reflective practice
- continuous professional learning
- an understanding of the importance of exploring beliefs and biases
- strong, collaborative relationships and effective communication
- an ability to see multiple views and perspectives
- advocacy for children, families, colleagues, policies and practices that value equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice
- a desire to grow as a professional, learning with and from diverse individuals and groups

All RECEs are leaders in their communities; however, RECEs in supervisory roles have additional responsibilities with respect to leadership. They are role models to staff, community partners, volunteers, pre-service early childhood education students as well as children and their families. Their practice and policy decisions and actions influence the emotional, physical and social environment and learning community members.

Supervisors play a unique role in developing equitable relationships that respect diversity and culture. Supervisors get to know staff – their strengths, interests and areas that excite or challenge them. They learn about each staff member and pay attention to group dynamics in the practice setting so they can effectively support both individual and team learning. These leadership practices are informed and purposeful, and directly and indirectly benefit all members of the learning community.

Those in supervisory roles can seek opportunities for staff to engage in ongoing learning about diversity and culture. Leaders help generate curiosity, openness and trust among staff. All RECEs need to be courageous and look at their personal beliefs and bias, but supervisors are role models who lead the charge in this area. They actively engage in self-reflection, becoming aware of their personal beliefs and biases and the ways they influence their professional practice. Leaders also reassure staff that everyone has personal beliefs that need to be identified and addressed. As well, they create safe spaces for staff to engage in reflection.

One way to do this is by creating safe, welcoming physical and social atmospheres where staff can discuss their own personal beliefs. For example, in team meetings, supervisors and staff can discuss resources, case studies and reflective questions that explore the complexities of diversity, culture and inclusion in a way that generates constructive and respectful dialogue. Reflective group learning can provide staff with opportunities to explore scenarios that are similar to the context in which they work. This provides RECEs with opportunities to collaborate and consider their own practice and the learning community with whom they work. Supervisors can support staff to consider possible instances of bias toward anyone in the learning environment, and together they can solve problems, create solutions and improve outcomes by eliminating the hidden curriculum.

Supervisors also ensure that the pedagogical support they offer staff aligns with equity, diversity and inclusion. They guide staff to see how their personal beliefs might unconsciously influence pedagogical practice and which children, families and colleagues they focus on and why. This is important; research demonstrates that children from particular cultures and backgrounds are often unconsciously seen by educators in stereotypical ways or as having specific characteristics and behaviours that afford them certain levels of intelligence, skill or even specific problems and aggressive tendencies (NAEYC, 2020).



Figure 15: Educators in a meeting

With this in mind, supervisors can encourage RECEs to look beyond their own individual beliefs by providing them with opportunities to consider how stereotypes in society have established certain ideas about certain people and groups of people. This could help RECEs in understanding where some of their personal beliefs have been unknowingly established.

Leaders find ways to support staff to see the damaging effects of negative assumptions when they observe and document children without considering the ways their established belief systems may be influencing their practice. When supervisors oversee the curriculum and staff's processes of observing, documenting, planning, implementing and reviewing children's progress, they emphasize the importance of engaging with children with an awareness of different stereotypes and inequities that exist in society. Leaders ensure that RECEs consider each child and family outside of a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, and instead through the lens of their unique familial context, outlook, interests, capabilities and experiences.

RECEs in supervisory roles need to look for ways to work collectively with others who are dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion. They create formal and informal communities of practice with people from different cultural groups and, from here, their network expands and their relationships strengthen. They seek ways to collaborate with colleagues, families and members of the immediate and broader community. In doing so, supervisors expand their understanding of past and current realities of different groups. Engaging with others can support leaders to consider how their personal beliefs might influence their practice, including how they engage with, monitor and evaluate staff, or create organizational policies and practices.

Leaders demonstrate a commitment to ensuring the learning environment maintains a diverse, healthy organizational culture and climate that is equitable. Supervisors advocate for creating or adapting workplace structures, policies and practices to ensure inclusion and equity are observed. When engaging in activities that guide the direction of the organization, they think about diversity and culture when considering things such as the:

- program statement and philosophy
- mission and vision
- pedagogy and curriculum
- policies and protocols
- hiring and staff evaluation



Figure 16: Educators and a child talking



Read the [\*Practice Note: Professional Supervision of Supervisees\*](#) (2020).

*How Does Learning Happen? For Leaders* (2014) says that professionals in leadership roles regularly review, revise and develop workplace policies and protocols to ensure they outline staff's responsibilities to observe the principles of equity, diversity and inclusion, and to positively contribute to the workplace. When designing policies, leaders find ways to make them accessible to all stakeholders by ensuring that everyone understands and adheres to them, before a difficult situation arises.

Inclusive leaders are role models. They speak out in constructive ways to promote social justice, diversity and inclusion. Research demonstrates a strong link between effective leadership practices and the overall well-being of the practice setting, and, in turn, the well-being of children, families and staff. Leaders actively seek ways to involve members of the learning community in the program in culturally responsive ways. They do this by learning with others and sharing appropriate aspects of their professional knowledge and experiences. This demonstrates the importance of critical reflection and continuous professional learning for all members of the profession, regardless of position, title or length of service.

Remember, you do not do this work alone. As an RECE, you regularly collaborate with others to share and discuss resources and strategies in order to strengthen your professional practice. Learning about diversity and culture is a lifelong endeavour that can always be expanded upon and refined. As role models, RECEs contribute to creating an inclusive workplace culture that respects the dignity of all members of the learning community.



Figure 17: A group of educators



# Scenarios and reflective questions

## Aren't you the nanny?

Carmen moved from South America to Canada with her husband and baby a few months ago. She was excited to learn about early years programs for children and families in her community.

During her first visit to a drop-in program, she was pleased to meet families and caregivers from many different backgrounds. While participating in the program, a woman with a child approached Carmen. The woman smiled and asked, "How old is the baby?" Carmen said: "He's ten months." The woman said, "It's beautiful to see how attached he is to you." Puzzled, Carmen looked up from her son to the woman who turned away to engage in an activity with the child.

Because Carmen and her baby enjoyed the drop-in program, they returned the following week. She had the opportunity to meet an RECE who announced that registration was available for a new music program that would begin next month. Carmen decided to register for the program. She filled in the registration form and returned it to the RECE. As Carmen walked away, the RECE called her back and said: "Wait! Will you be bringing the child to the classes?" "Yes, we are really excited!" Carmen replied. The RECE said: "Well, in that case, we need your name for our records too." Carmen paused and said: "I already provided my name." She pointed to the parent name(s) section of the form and said, "See, right here – Carmen." The RECE's face turned red and she said: "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you were the nanny."

Carmen was really taken aback. She was surprised and discouraged that the RECE automatically assumed that she was the nanny. Her positive feelings about the program were fading. Carmen quickly became worried and felt a need to explain: "I know I don't look like my baby. It's because my husband is white." She panicked and presented their health cards to prove their relationship. The RECE insisted it was not needed, but Carmen showed them anyway.

Later that day, Carmen thought about her experience and decided not to return to the program.

### Reflective questions

- We all make unconscious or conscious assumptions based on our beliefs which have often been established by strong or dominant messages in society.
  - How did assumptions impact Carmen?
  - Consider whether your beliefs have influenced your practice in a similar way?
- Reflect on ways to communicate across differences in family structures with your colleagues.
- Which of the Code and Standards might you consider in this reflection?

## My hair, my crown!

In preparation for kindergarten picture day, Hope arrives at school with her hair in a new braided style. Her friends comment on how nice her hair looks and how the braids with the mermaid-inspired beads flow down her back. Hope beams with pride.

Today is also Hope's day to be the kindergarten helper. Ms. Peggy calls her to the front of the room. Hope walks excitedly toward Ms. Peggy and stands beside her ready to help with the morning instruction. Ms. Peggy smiles and then takes a deep breath. She notices a pleasant aroma and moves toward Hope to confirm where the scent is coming from. Ms. Peggy looks at Hope and then at the other children and says: "Hope, your hair smells amazing!" Ms. Peggy takes another exaggerated breath, demonstrating her actions to the class, and says: "It smells like coconut and mango."

Ms. Peggy calls over Ms. Sarah, saying, "You have to come and smell Hope's hair." Ms. Sarah walks over and bends down to smell Hope's hair. "Wow. It does smell really yummy, mmmmm." Hope looks up at both of her educators silently. She appears confused and uncomfortable. Then, Ms. Sarah invites some of the children on the carpet to line up and smell Hope's hair. Many children come to smell her, and a few touched her hair too. The children were making various comments as they sniffed and felt her hair, saying things like "I wish my mom would do my hair like that," and "Me too, I want beads in my hair." But one child said, "Ewww what's wrong with your hair," while another added, "Ya, why does it smell like that? It stinks." Ms. Sarah said, "Children, don't say that, that hurts her!"

Ms. Naomi, the early childhood education placement student, who was from a similar cultural background as Hope, witnesses the commotion. She's disturbed by what she sees and empathizes with Hope, especially when she notices her looking at the floor with tears welling in her eyes. Ms. Naomi feels like Hope is in very visible distress. Conflicted by what she should do, she watches as Ms. Peggy, Ms. Sarah and the other children treat Hope like an exhibit by pointing, touching and getting into her personal space. Ms. Naomi walks over and gives Hope a tissue to dry her eyes, and she asks her if she's all right. Ms. Naomi is unsure of what to say in front of her placement educators and the group of children.

### Reflection questions

- Consider the educator's words, actions and the overall learning environment.
  - Why is this situation problematic?
  - How could this interaction affect Hope's sense of belonging and well-being?
  - How did the educators contribute to the children's responses to Hope's hair?
- What factors impacted Ms. Naomi and her response to the other educators?
- How would you have supported Hope during this incident?
- As an emerging professional who is about to begin her career, how could Ms. Naomi's decision-making be guided by the Code and Standards?
- What resources could support the educators in developing strategies that ensure equity, diversity and inclusion in the future? How could the Code and Standards guide them?

## Respect for Indigenous culture

Michelle is an RECE with 15 years of experience working in a child care centre. She has just returned from a weekend conference, where she heard an Anishinaabe Elder share opening and closing prayers, some stories, songs and smudging. Having just read the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report, Michelle is inspired and eager to respond to the calls to action. She immediately starts searching the Internet to learn more about indigeneity and ways that she can start indigenizing her preschool learning environment to make it an inclusive space.

Over the next few weeks, she adds posters of The Seven Grandfather Teachings and a new round rug depicting the Medicine Wheel. When the children gather together in a circle, she offers to smudge them using the information from the Internet. Michelle is feeling good about putting into practice the things she has learned.

One day, Michelle is asked to meet with her supervisor. The supervisor informs her that they received a call from one of the families. The parent would like to know where or who gave Michelle these teachings, items and information. The information and teachings she is giving the children are not reflective of the local Indigenous community.

### Reflection questions

- Consider Michelle's ideas and actions.
  - Why might this situation be problematic?
  - How could indigenizing the space in this way impact Indigenous children and families' sense of identity, belonging and well-being?
- What other resources could Michelle access to support inclusion in the environment and to ensure that Indigenous identity is respected and valued?

Nabil is seven years old. He and his mother, Hania, recently arrived from Syria. Nabil will be attending school in the fall, and Hania is relieved that he is also enrolled in the before- and after-school child care program at the same location.

In preparation for school, Nabil's family arranged to have a tour. As they walked past one room, Nabil peered in. Ana and Rima, both RECEs, introduced themselves. Upon learning that Nabil would be attending the child care program, they told him that they were looking forward to him joining the group. Nabil's heart filled with joy when Rima said "Wada'an!" He and his family smiled and felt reassured by the sense of belonging they received from the educators.

Nabil was nervous on the first day of school and held his mother's hand as they approached the line-up. Ms. Temple, his Grade 2 teacher, raised her hand above her head and blew a whistle to make sure everyone could hear and see her. Nabil's entire body twitched, and he quickly raised his shaking hands to cover his ears. He looked around to see if anyone else was concerned, but no one seemed worried. Ms. Temple shouted, "Hello, my new students. Follow me into our class so that we can get started!" Nabil followed and turned back to wave at his smiling mom.

For several reasons, Nabil was anxious at school. For one, there were loud sounds for everything – the announcements, transitions and recess time. The scariest sound of all was the fire-alarm bell, which rang today for the first time. The students received no warning so when the alarm sounded, Nabil ran screaming to his teacher thinking there was a real emergency. She was supporting all of the children, so Nabil took shelter under a desk and wouldn't move. His peers giggled and called him a crybaby.

Rima learned about Nabil's experience with the fire drill from Ms. Temple, and she suggested that the staff meet to find other ways to conduct the required practice fire drills. Some of Rima's colleagues disagreed; they felt that the drills should be as 'true to life' as possible. An RECE felt that in using softer measures the children's safety in a real emergency would be at risk. He said, "We can't just ring a little bell to get their attention. It's better if Nabil gets used to the routines as soon as possible." Rima didn't like these ideas, but she also didn't know what to say. After reflecting on the situation, she decided to email her supervisor to discuss it.

### Reflection questions

- Consider the overall learning environment – the school and the child care setting. What are some aspects in each environment that may be altered to support Nabil and other children who are sensitive to particular sounds?
- How would you support Nabil or a child in a similar situation?
- How would you involve Nabil, his family and other professionals in the school to support him?
- How could Rima's decision-making and conversations with her colleagues be guided by the Code and Standards?
- What resources could support the RECEs in better understanding Nabil's experiences so that they can develop strategies to support him?

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