

Racism and Bias in Reporting to Child Welfare

This resource is part of the [Sexual Abuse Prevention Program](#) educational requirement for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs).

Registered Early Childhood Educators understand that because of their professional knowledge and role, they are in a unique position to recognize possible signs of child abuse, neglect and family violence, and have a particular duty to report their suspicions ([Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#), Standard VI: A). In addition, it is critical for RECEs to understand the ways that systemic racism operates in society and to recognize that racialized children and families are disproportionately reported to authorities compared to non-racialized children and families.

The College of Early Childhood Educators (the College) firmly believes that all people and all racial groups deserve equity in all areas of life, including child welfare and protection. Change is necessary to eliminate existing racial inequities, and education plays a critical role in driving it ([Statement of Commitment to Anti-Racism](#), 2020).

Systemic Racism

The historical and contemporary experiences of racialized communities — Black, First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Peoples of Colour — are vastly different from those of white settlers and their descendants. Institutions such as education, health care, and child welfare were founded, and continue to be influenced, by colonial systems and systemic racism in policies and practices that oppress Ontario's racialized communities.

It's important for RECEs to do the following to challenge systems of oppression:

- Learn about the ways in which racism functions
- Critically reflect on their beliefs and bias
- Take action in early learning and care environments

Bias in reporting racialized communities to child welfare

Systemic racism and bias against racialized communities have led to an over-representation in the child welfare system of First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Black children and families.

This over-representation reinforces negative beliefs and bias about individuals and communities involved with child welfare systems. “African Canadian children and youth are 40% more likely to be investigated compared to White children. Only Indigenous children showed greater disparities than African Canadians” (p. 22) ([One Vision One Voice Framework](#), 2016).

“Despite making up only 4.1% of Ontario’s population under age 15, Indigenous children represent approximately 30% of foster children. Indigenous children are over-represented at all points of child welfare decision-making. This over-representation increases as service decisions become more intrusive”.

“The proportion of Black children admitted into care was 2.2 times higher than their proportion in the child population” ([Ontario Human Rights Commission](#), 2018).

Negative assumptions and bias about class, poverty, race, and their relation to risk are linked to educators and other professionals over-reporting racialized families to child welfare. Poverty in racialized families may be viewed as possible neglect; for example, the number of children in one bedroom may be a basis for child welfare involvement. Families may be blamed for these external factors such as poverty, even though they are largely out of their control ([Ontario Human Rights Commission](#), 2018).

Latin American children also experience disproportionate and different contact with the Ontario child welfare systems as compared to White children. In 2018, Latin American children were 2.3 times as likely as White children to be investigated in Ontario ([Investigations Involving Latin American Children in Ontario in 2018](#), 2020). Latin American and Asian children are overrepresented in cases selected for investigation by Canadian Child Protection Services when allegations of physical abuse are involved ([Ontario Human Rights Commission](#), 2018).

A professional’s “conscious or unconscious racial bias, may lead to incorrect assumptions about the level of risk children are exposed to.” Risk assessment tools, standards and service delivery practices have been criticized since these reflect “White, Western, Christian notions of acceptable child rearing, and may not be applicable to Indigenous and Black families.” Relying on risk assessment tools, coupled with conscious or unconscious bias, may contribute to assumptions about racialized children and families being “inherently wrong or deficient” ([Ontario Human Rights Commission](#), 2018).

Beliefs and Bias

Bias: a subjective opinion, preference, prejudice, or inclination, often formed without reasonable justification, which influences the ability of an individual or group to evaluate a particular situation objectively or accurately ([Canadian Race Relations Foundation](#), 2021).

To address racism, it's important to critically reflect on the ways that dominant messages in society influence the beliefs and biases that people form. Everyone has beliefs and biases, and they operate consciously and unconsciously, influencing how people perceive themselves, others, and society. When racialized children and families are portrayed negatively in education, social services, and health care this has the potential to further perpetuate negative biases about them.

There are evolving discussions in the profession to understand how to apply the information found in child welfare reports by the Ontario Human Rights Commission and the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies to the field of early childhood education.

"Black and Indigenous children are overrepresented in Ontario's child welfare system not only in care, but also in decision to investigate. Ontario's Early Childhood Educators contribute to this overrepresentation in investigations through their duty to report to Children's Aid Society (CAS). Without anti-racism education and accountability, the sector will continue to contribute to the overrepresentation of Black and Indigenous families being investigated and separated by child welfare agencies" ([Anti-Racism in ECE Ontario](#), 2021)¹.

RECEs' responsibilities to reflect on beliefs and bias

RECEs have an ethical obligation to children and families, to be aware of the:

- Beliefs and bias they hold about individuals and communities and how this impacts their professional practice;
- External factors such as media, that strengthen and/or confirm bias and stereotypes;
- Ways that racialized communities continue to be oppressed in systems (e.g., health care, education and child welfare) that were not designed to support them; and
- Role of intersectionality (i.e., status, family structure, sexuality, religion, class, gender and gender identity) and the ways that it affects Peoples of Colour, Black, First Nations, Métis and Inuit Peoples.

¹Anti-Racism in ECE Ontario: A public letter co-signed by early childhood education (ECE) organizations and stakeholders calls on post-secondary institutions and government to ensure the inclusion of anti-racism education in ECE programs.

When RECEs understand their beliefs and biases, they can work towards equitable practices. Without an active willingness to analyse biases, an RECE's practice may be shaped by unconscious and harmful stereotypical ideas about children and families. Negative bias can hinder an RECE's ability to provide equitable care for children and develop supportive partnerships with families.

Negative beliefs and bias about a child, family or community have the potential to adversely influence an RECE's:

- Thoughts, behaviours, interactions, and actions (including who they observe and report to authorities such as a supervisor, principal or child welfare agency)
- Relationships, communication, and collaboration
- Perceptions and expectations of children and families
- Ethical judgment and decision-making processes

If systemic racism influences an RECE's beliefs or bias about a child or family, then an RECE's interactions with them may be underpinned by skepticism, negative perspectives, or deficit-based thinking. For example, RECEs could be watching racialized people more critically through over-surveillance. Without the influence of systemic racism, RECEs may associate a non-racialized child or family positively and feel more inclined to develop collaborative relationships that support learning and a sense of belonging.

The Code and Standards says that RECEs “understand the inherent imbalance of power in relationships between a professional and a child or family and know and understand that care must be taken to ensure that children and families are protected from potential abuse of RECEs' position of power during, after, or related to the provision of their professional services” (Standard V: B.3). An RECE needs to not only reflect on the existence of the power dynamic between themselves as a professional and a child or family, but also need to consider whether their beliefs and bias about a child or family's identify (e.g., race, gender, class) are influencing their [ethical decision-making](#) or [professional judgment](#) when considering reporting to child welfare.

Duty to Report

The [Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017](#) states that if there are reasonable grounds to suspect that a child is at risk of family violence, neglect, abandonment, emotional, physical, or sexual abuse or harm, there is a duty to immediately report this concern to a CAS. It is not necessary to be certain that a child is or may need protection to make a report.

RECEs comply with the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act* about their duty to report suspected child abuse and neglect to the Children's Aid Society (Standard VI: C.8.).

When considering whether they have reasonable grounds to suspect a child is at risk, it's important that RECEs engage in self-reflection to decipher whether their concerns are related to any bias they hold about racialized children, their families or communities to which they belong. While it is beyond the scope of practice for RECEs to confirm abuse or neglect, RECEs are responsible for considering what may have led them to suspect a particular child and family was at risk, including whether beliefs, bias and racism may be influencing their assumptions.

This duty to report is of such importance that there can be legal consequences for failing to uphold it. More information about responsibilities related to the [duty to report](#) is available in the College's professional advisory, which addresses the requirement to report child abuse, the suspicions of harm or the risk of harm to children, under section 125 of the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act, 2017*.

Additional resources to further support your learning

- [Ontario Incidence Studies Canadian](#), Child Welfare Research Portal
- [Why It's Not Child Abuse Prevention Month Any More](#), Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies
- [One Vision One Voice](#), Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies
- [Supporting South Asian Families](#), Ontario Children's Aid Society: Peel Region
- [Concerns about Child Welfare](#), Ontario Human Rights Commission
- [Interrupted Childhoods: Over-representation of Indigenous and Black children in Ontario Child Welfare](#), Ontario Human Rights Commission
- [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action](#), Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada

For opportunities to reflect on and improve your practice in the areas of bias and racism, read the RECE's [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#) along with the following College resources:

- [Professional Advisory on Duty to Report](#) and [Reflection Guide on Duty to Report](#)
- [Practice Note on Beliefs and Bias](#) and [Reflection Guide on Beliefs and Bias](#)
- [Practice Guideline on Diversity and Culture](#)
- [Practice Guideline on Communication and Collaboration](#)



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Cette publication est également disponible en français sous le titre : *Racisme et préjugés dans les signalements aux services de protection de l'enfance*

If you require an accessible format or communications support, please contact us at 1 888 961-8558 / communications@college-ece.ca.

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