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Factors influencing child development

Practice Guideline on Child Development

The applicable Code and Standards in this section:

RECEs:

- draw from their professional knowledge of child development, learning theories and pedagogical and curriculum approaches (Ethic A).
- design or modify indoor and outdoor learning environments to support children’s self-regulation, independence, reasonable risk-taking, meaningful exploration and positive interactions (Standard III: C.6).
- are attuned and responsive to the holistic needs of the children in their care (Standard I: C.1).
- understand that children are best understood within the context of their families (Standard I: B.3).
- work in partnership with families, children and colleagues to create safe, healthy and inviting environments that promote a sense of belonging, well-being and inclusion (Standard III: C.1).
- facilitate community partnerships for the benefit of children and families (Standard IV: C.3).



Standard II says that RECEs co-construct knowledge with children, families and colleagues. RECEs draw from their professional knowledge of child development, learning theories and pedagogical and curriculum approaches. This allows them to best plan, implement, document and assess child-centred, inquiry and play-based learning experiences for children (Ethic A).

Figure 2.1 visualizes some of the many factors that influence a child’s development.

Play and inquiry-based learning

Child development is linked to overall health, well-being and learning. Play is connected to each of these elements and is viewed as one of the most important parts of childhood ([Early Years Study 4: Play with Purpose](#), 2020). Play-based learning is so fundamental in early childhood education that it was incorporated into the profession's scope of practice described in the [Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007 \(Practice Note on Play-Based Learning\)](#), 2018).

RECEs play an important role in children's early experiences. They foster children's joy of learning through play and inquiry-based approaches to pedagogy and curriculum design. To do this, RECEs view children as active participants in their learning. Believing that children are active citizens and members of their communities aligns with the new sociology of childhood. This theory emphasizes children's rights and their capability to participate in decisions affecting their lives, as it positions "children as people who have a voice and deserve to be heard" (Rose, 2011, p. 21).

With current and comprehensive knowledge of the various factors that influence child development, your pedagogical approach will consider the wide range of children's interests, gifts, experiences, outlooks and capabilities. If a space is truly inclusive, it takes into account all children's interests, inquiries, ideas and stories. To do this, RECEs can engage in self-reflection about their own views of the child and the ways their own early experiences may be contributing to their practice decisions. Each of these actions contributes to healthy development.

Self- and co-regulation

Self-regulation is the ability to deal with and recover from stress and is central to a child's life and their capacity to learn and build friendships. Ontario's Ministry of Education draws on the work of Dr. Charles Pascal who states that children's ability to self-regulate is not about complying with authorities as it undermines a child's own ability to self-regulate. Instead, self-regulation is viewed as supporting children's capabilities to establish their own internal motivation for adapting to, and understanding, emotional and social situations and demands.

Children's ability to self-regulate also allows them to set limits for themselves and manage their emotions, attention and behaviours. The ability to self-regulate allows children to develop the emotional well-being and habits of mind, such as persistence and curiosity that are essential for their holistic development. Remember, children will do this in each of their own ways – each child will differ.

Read the [Practice Guideline on Supporting Positive Interactions with Children](#) (2016) to deepen your understanding of the importance of supporting self-regulation in children, and the ways it can contribute to a child's overall health and development.

Review [The Kindergarten Program](#) (2016) and think about the domains of self-regulation and how they connect to child development.

Research outlined by Zero to Three points out the importance of co-regulation, which is described as the responsive interactions with others that support children and guide them to regulate their emotions. As a co-regulator, and someone with your own emotions, it's important to talk about emotion and to model self-regulation. This helps children understand, express and adapt their thoughts, feelings and behaviours as needed to support their overall well-being. As a result, children feel grounded, enabling them to focus, learn and develop friendships. Read more about co-regulation in the article: [It takes two: Zero to Three](#), 2017.

Keep in mind that children will respond to environments in a variety of ways. It's part of an RECE's responsibility to consider what may be contributing to children's behaviours and actions. Learning how to work with children goes beyond acquiring skills. Educators need to reflect, and develop an understanding of how their own experiences shape their practice, which in turn affects the children's experiences ([How teachers remember their own childhoods affects how they challenge school inequities](#), 2021).

To do this, consider your own emotions and experiences, as well as the overall atmosphere: the sounds, temperature, visuals and the *feeling* of the space. Get to know children and families. Talk with families and consider the children's experiences together. Find out if children have had an adequate balance of activity and opportunities to rest. With choices, children's ability to self-regulate and learn is supported. As well, when children have access to a variety of resources, materials, artifacts and places, children, in varying times and ways, develop the ability to select ones that provide stimulation or a calming effect when *they* determine *they* need it ([The Kindergarten Program](#), 2016).

Relationships and environments

Strong relationships with RECEs, their peers and the spaces they share promote children's sense of belonging. If children know their interests and ideas are valid, and that they themselves are important, their well-being, learning and development are enhanced. Quality early learning environments are described as places "filled with conversations, not only between educators and children, but also between and among children who bring their own experiences and their own repertoire of words" (*Early Years Study 4: Play with Purpose*, 2020, p. 17).

RECEs design or modify indoor and outdoor learning environments to support children's self-regulation, independence, reasonable risk-taking, meaningful exploration and positive interactions (Standard III: C.6).

The environment also plays a fundamental role in child development. Its importance is broadly discussed in Indigenous Peoples' knowledges and early years philosophies. For example, connecting to the natural world contributes to children's mental, physical, emotional, cultural and spiritual health and development. Providing daily opportunities to explore, care for and interact with the natural world helps to strengthen these connections.

Toulouse (2018) writes that programs attended by Indigenous children must include connections to Mother Earth and her children – animals, plants, the elements and the seasons (Each Child Brings a Special Gift: Nurturing Indigenous Identity and Belonging, 2018, p. 6).

Aspects within the environment, such as the relationships, the learning materials, visuals, sounds, daily routines, schedules, philosophies, values and guidelines contribute to the overall aesthetic. They also influence children's growing sense of belonging, as well as their sense of selves in the context of the broader community. Children's sense of community can be heightened, positively contributing to their development, through the development of meaningful bonds with the people and places around them.

"Early learning is 'of a place' when children and educators engage with local histories with respectful curiosity and a desire to contribute and share. Indigenous peoples have been the knowledge keepers of these places for hundreds of generations" (Ministry of Education, British Columbia, 2019, p. 21).

In many Indigenous philosophies, all members of the community contribute in varied and valued roles in children's lives (*Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework* (IELCC), 2018). When the entire family is involved in the program and curriculum, it increases children's chances of feeling a sense of belonging through their contribution. This, in turn, allows children to create, learn and grow.

Autonomy and attachments

Each child brings a special gift to this world and it is our shared responsibility to nurture it (Toulouse, 2018, p. 8).

Children develop attachments to places, people and experiences that are formed in those interactions. Some early childhood advocates consider adult involvement as “an opportunity for educators to structure and direct children's play, keeping in mind specific learning goals,” while others suggest an adult's involvement could be “hijacking children's play,” stating that children develop stronger bonds with people and places when given time away from the surveillance of adults (*Early Years Study 4: Play with Purpose*, 2020, p. 18). Considering both views, a balance needs to be achieved in this area, one that involves the experiences of educators, children and families.

RECEs promote learning and children's growing sense of curiosity, confidence, community and self-concept. RECEs are responsible for supervising, positively guiding and providing children with learning opportunities that challenge them to take healthy risks without pushing them beyond their capabilities. If a child is at risk of physical or psychological harm, RECEs intervene to protect the child(ren). This requires RECEs to be attuned and responsive to the holistic needs of the children in their care (Standard I: C.1), as well as be aware of the ways their own feelings, beliefs and experiences influence their decision making.

Many Indigenous philosophies are grounded in the importance of cultivating relationships among the spiritual, the natural and the self. When developing relationships with people, the environment and “all things that make or give them life” (Greenwood, 2005, p. 554), it can be inferred that children develop a sense of themselves through those relationships within the complex aspects of the world around them.

Families and communities

Families are of primary importance in children's development and well-being, and RECEs understand that children are best understood in the context of their families, cultures and communities (Standard I: B.3).

Toulouse (2018) believes it's vital to “really know” children and families, including learning about their family structure, their background and the languages they speak at home. Toulouse emphasizes that relationships with families take “time, trust and understanding,” indicating that many “Indigenous Peoples appreciate really knowing who the educator is as a human being.” Valued descriptors that encompass the character of the educator in relevant programs with Indigenous children are traits such as: informed, compassionate and resourceful (pp. 4-5).

How and in what ways does your program consider Indigenous Peoples' views and perspectives (e.g., physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual)? Toulouse invites educators to consider what your program does well and what you need to work on (2018, p. 8).

The learning environment is a space for everyone and RECEs work with others to:

- Provide ample room to move around and be in the space. For example, there are places for families to engage with children and educators, or there is space for strollers or wheelchairs;
- Consider the aesthetics of the environment, such as the arrangement, temperature, natural elements, music, sound and light levels;

- Ensure materials, images and sounds in the environment are familiar to children and families. RECEs think about their approach to pedagogy and curriculum, the music, art, graphics, policies, ceremonies, celebrations and other aspects of the program; and
- Consider the ways that social differences are discussed and represented.

Each child and family that arrives at your practice setting has unique beliefs, circumstances and experiences, and through relationship-building RECEs can learn about them. For example, many Indigenous Peoples consider families as the “conveyor of culture, language and engagement” (Toulouse, 2018). Through relationships, you learn what the family feels is important for their child and they can learn about you. It’s also important to find ways to connect families with others, recognizing that children and families learn from one another through their own relationships.



A family is a group of children and adults who are related by affections, kinship, dependency or trust. Families can include single-parent families, same-sex families, interracial families, multi-generational families and foster families (Code and Standards, 2017).

Remember, families may:

- live in a multi-generational household that exposes children to a wide range of interactions with people from multiple age groups and different generations (e.g., grandparents, Elders, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles). This may support the child’s social and emotional development as well as the development of a positive cultural identity.
- have barriers to accessing nature, outdoor spaces and playgrounds. This may hinder their child’s gross motor, social and emotional development. As a result, the child may deepen their attachment to family members, reading materials, games and indoor spaces.
- be facing poverty and seeking ways to house and dress their child to match those of the child’s peers.
- be experiencing grief from the death of a family member and focused on developing new supportive relationships and a connection to the loved one in the spirit world.
- live with artists, musicians, dancers or storytellers that encourage movement, singing and creativity. This can enhance the child’s interests and creativity, as well as their coordination and gross motor skills.
- experience additional stigma during crises or pandemics (e.g., families in multigenerational households or families who experience anti-Asian racism).
- speak more than one language and encourage communication in all. This may support the child’s communication, language and identity development. Conversely, the child may feel discriminated against and excluded among their peer groups.
- have several children, of which one or more is experiencing ‘[colourism](#)’, where a child with dark skin may feel excluded or dismissed while their sibling with light skin is favoured and complimented.

Consider research on the relationship between child development, health, well-being and strong relationships with children, families and communities (Dr. Jean Clinton: [The Power of Positive Adult Child Relationships: Connection Is the Key](#)).

Considering social determinants of health

Global research indicates that high-quality early learning and care settings can “reduce the impact of adversity on children. If children experience consistent, positive relationships from key adults, they are more likely to grow up resilient in their wider world” (Realising the Ambition, 2020, p.39).

RECEs may be familiar with the social determinants of health (SDOH) and the ways they’re connected to child development, well-being and learning. As you build and maintain caring and responsive relationships with children, families and colleagues, consider the social determinants of health and how they impact families in different ways.

SDOH play a key role in the quality of children’s relationships, health and overall development. They also influence a family’s overall health which will also influence the child’s well-being. Families physically, mentally and emotionally carry their experiences, biology, traumas and complex layers of history. A family’s historical footprint can influence the ways children develop, even when these footprints have faded over time.

These resources can support your understanding of the influence of early adverse experiences on children’s overall development and health:

- [Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#)
- [Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development](#)

The [Canadian Mental Health Association](#) says that “social determinants of health are some of the most important factors that impact mental and physical health.” The [Government of Canada](#) features the SDOH that are deemed relevant to our context. Inequities in society exist and benefit some communities over others. The chart below highlights some of the factors that may impact a child and their family’s overall health.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Access to health services• Biology and genetics• Childhood Experiences• Colonization• Culture | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Education and literacy• Employment and working conditions• Gender and gender identity• Income and social status | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Physical environments• Race and racism• Sexuality• Social supports and coping skills |
|---|--|---|

SDOH directly impact children, so it’s important for RECEs to learn about how child development is linked to the determinants, and to explore the role of the social, cultural and physical environment in which the child and family are situated.

Without the basic elements required for survival, such as clean water and adequate nutrition, rest, exercise and connections to community and culture, it may put children at risk for poor health.

Consider how difficult it might be to learn and focus if a child is:

- sick;
- hungry;
- tired;
- feeling isolated;
- feeling threatened or unsafe; and/or
- feeling disconnected from their cultural or social community.

Likewise, when families feel the strains of life it can affect the quality of their interactions with their children and other family members. There are many challenges that can greatly affect the entire family, such as stress in relationships, racism, discrimination, poverty, neglect, violence, legal issues, addiction and colonization. Some families face greater challenges and may have less access to the resources they need to address them. When children are exposed to prolonged periods of stress, their sense of belonging, overall well-being, their engagement and ability to focus may be severely impacted.

Since RECEs are responsible for building positive, trusting relationships with families and children, they're in a unique position to recognize possible signs of child abuse, neglect and family violence. Review the [Professional Advisory on the Duty to Report](#) (2019) and the related [Reflection Guide](#).

Families will have a range of priorities for themselves and their child, therefore, it's critical to get to know children and families to learn about those priorities and what they feel is most important. For example, it could be very difficult to engage in play and learning following a move, family separation, regular lack of sleep or adequate nutrition. Depending on the circumstances, each family will have varying degrees of access to resources that can support them.

Ethic B says 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, sharing knowledge and resources to support the well-being and learning of children.

Standard III says RECEs work in partnership with children, families and colleagues to create a safe, healthy and inviting environment that promotes a sense of belonging, well-being and inclusion (C.1). Learning about each family requires the development of trusting, responsive relationships that create a space for you to learn relevant information about them and their circumstances in order to support them.

As professionals, you are not obtaining information to judge, ridicule or to gossip with your colleagues; your primary purpose is to support the family in ways that demonstrate care, trust and respect while promoting their sense of belonging. Standard IV says RECEs collaborate with families and colleagues, including community partners and members of other professions, to access resources and expertise. They facilitate community partnerships for the benefit of children and families (C.3).

You can add your thoughts and reflections in the space below.

Download the Pause and Reflect on:

- Concept of children's autonomy ([Word](#) | [PDF](#))
- Supporting wellness ([Word](#) | [PDF](#))