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Identity development

Practice Guideline on Child Development

The applicable Code and Standards in this section:

RECEs:

- are knowledgeable about the research and theories related to the impact of caring and responsive relationships on children’s development, learning, self-regulation, identity and well-being (Standard I: B.1).
- access available information regarding the relevant family circumstances of children and the factors that may contribute to shaping their individual and family identity (including, but not limited to, the child’s health, legal custody and/or guardianship, family structure and cultural and linguistic background) (Standard I: C.3).
- 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).

The educator is a fundamental part of the living story and development of identity for all children (Ball, 2012; Pearson, 2016 as cited in Toulouse, 2018).

In addition to traditional areas of development featured earlier in this guideline, there are also “areas such as the creative, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions,” of the child and their experiences that should be considered as well (HDLH?, 2014, p. 17).

Rozon (2018) says that “children’s identity is defined on the basis of a set of factors, including their origins, values, family and the surrounding environment” (p. 2). Children form perceptions of social differences and similarities among peoples and cultural groups, and they’re capable of recognizing and talking about injustices. They make sense of the world by what they hear and see independently or with their families, peers, Elders and educators. As role models, RECEs need to be aware of when they might be unintentionally reinforcing harmful stereotypes. They also need to talk about injustice and discrimination, while supporting children to do the same.



Researchers Berman, Daniel, Butler, MacNevin and Royer (2017) highlight international studies that overwhelmingly show educators may actually reinforce “prevailing racial and ethnic stereotypes that foster peer segregation by taking a ‘colorblind’ approach, in other words, not discussing or ‘seeing’ race”. This approach may seem neutral, “but it actually works to exacerbate racial oppression” (p. 52).

When certain cultural groups are represented in damaging or stereotypical ways in society, including in the learning environment, it is psychologically painful and could lead to children developing a fear of difference or negative feelings, ideas and beliefs about people and the world. It’s important for RECEs to consider this and keep it in mind, because children are developing a growing sense of their identity, their family and their broader community at all times – including when they are in learning and care environments.

RECEs in supervisory roles can support staff and colleagues to build their comfort in responding to situations and queries about human differences – race, language, bodies, gender, disability, diverse family structures and other social and physical characteristics. The approach needs to be incorporated into the learning environment, and not simply a policy used to address an incident. Use an approach that focuses on prevention and build in regular discussions with staff to ensure that practices in place are clear to everyone. If children have the capacity to ask questions or have discussions on such topics, then RECEs need to become comfortable talking about them, too.

Some aspects of identity

Consider using the [Practice Note on Professional Judgment](#) (2018) and the [Practice Note on Ethical Decision Making](#) (2019) to guide your discussions and reflections on some aspects of children’s identity presented in the scenarios and resources below.

Indigenous identity

To support the specific rights, interests and circumstances of First Nations, Inuit and the Métis need to be acknowledged, affirmed, and implemented. The [Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework](#) (IELCC) highlights the distinct First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation frameworks that represent their respective vision, goals and priorities.

With colleagues or a community of practice, consider the following:

- What did you learn from reading, all or parts of, the Indigenous Early Learning and Child Care Framework?
 - Think about what else you need to learn. What are your next steps?
- What thoughts, feelings and/or ideas did this resource provoke for you?
- What are the implications of colonialism on past, present and future generations of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples?
- Think about the various ways that colonialism and colonial practices, seen in western theories of child development, impact a child’s sense of self and identity development?

Racial identity

With colleagues, read and consider the scenario *My hair, my crown!* in the [Practice Guideline on Diversity and Culture](#) (2020). Think about this story in relation to identity development. To engage further with the story, read the continuation in *My hair, my crown! The following days* (link provided at the end of this resource). Consider the reflection questions provided in the scenario, on your own, with colleagues or in a community of practice.



For some other perspectives on experiences influencing identity development, review these scenarios available below: *My name is Sanjiv*, *Look at me!* and *Mariam wears a hijab, too!*

Language

A family may be concerned about a child's lack of interest in learning or speaking the family's language. The family may be fearful their child is losing part of their cultural identity to the western or English world to fit in with their peers. In other instances, a child may be relied upon to be a translator at home or other social situations for their family. This responsibility acknowledges the child's capacity to engage in complex language and ideas, but relying on a child to translate for educators and families can also take them away from social activities with their peers.

Francophone identity

Rozon (2018) says it's the responsibility of educators in French-language programs to create an environment that encourages children's acquisition of the French language and Francophone culture in all its diversity. Since early childhood is a critical period for development, community vitality and language, acquisition needs to be carefully promoted in early learning environments. Early childhood is a key time for children to learn French as it builds and strengthens the Francophone identity and supports the development of a sense of belonging to the community. The critical role of early childhood in fostering French language transmission, community development and attendance of French-language programs is clear: the transmission of French as a mother tongue starting in early childhood is particularly important for the development and continued vitality of Francophone communities. [Government of Canada: Some facts on the Canadian Francophonie](#).

Consider other resources that support an understanding of the development of Francophone identity in Ontario via the [Association francophone à l'éducation des services à l'enfance de l'Ontario \(AFÉSEO\)](#) (French only) and this [Best Start](#) resource.

Disability identity

"Children with disabilities are not one uniform group. It is important to consider the various contexts and factors that contribute to shaping a child's development and identity within their families and communities. These factors impact how children view themselves and their ability to participate and engage in their environment" (*Practice Guideline on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities*, 2019, p. 9).

Read and consider the [Practice Guideline on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities](#), including the scenarios. Engage in a dialogue with colleagues using the scenarios to guide your discussions. Think specifically about the content in relation to a child's identity development.



Sexuality

Sexuality identity is an aspect of child sexuality development. Sexuality knowledge / education refers to supporting children's holistic development on topics such as appreciation of their bodies and establishment and maintenance of friendships and healthy relationships. It could include discussions about consent and boundaries, including how to say 'no' to unwanted touching, as well as answering children's questions honestly and in developmentally appropriate ways. It means knowing body parts and how to keep your body safe ([Action Canada for Sexual Health & Rights](#), 2020).

In the College's [Sexual Abuse Prevention Program](#), Teatree Tells addresses sexual abuse in relation to younger children 4- to 6-years-old. Teatree Tells focuses on safety skills for preschool children as a foundation to reduce the risk of child sexual abuse. The program includes prevention lessons on topics such as identifying a safe adult, identifying feelings, naming body parts, establishing personal boundaries, and okay/not okay touching.

As discussed throughout this guideline, the dominant developmental theories of childhood can strongly influence an RECE's beliefs and practice, including in relation to sexuality identity. Specifically, the idea of childhood innocence views childhood and adulthood as different from one another, and children are seen as fragile and in need of protection which means conversations around sexuality development are silenced (Balter et al., 2021a).

However, research tells us that sexuality development begins at birth. Children have a natural curiosity in discovering and exploring their bodies. Research has shown that the preschool years are filled with a great deal of questioning and curiosity and demonstrated sexuality development as a natural phenomenon occurring throughout childhood (Balter et al., 2021b). Therefore, the perspective of childhood innocence not only erases sexuality as an important part of human development, it prevents children from asking questions, and maintains and socializes inequity as the norm (Balter et al., 2021).

Ironically, even with the belief that discussions related to sexuality are inappropriate, early learning and care settings are often framed around subtle and invisible heteronormative narratives. Whether in the staffroom or learning environment, RECEs often emphasize celebrations along the lines of wedding engagements, marriage, honeymoons and motherhood. These paint the powerful picture of heteronormative and gender normative developmental milestones. These ideas can be harmful and, without addressing it, the status quo is reinforced, suggesting a linear pathway to 'normal' development.

Consult the following website that shares ways to respond to children's questions about their sexuality development: [Toronto Public Health: Sexual Health Promotion](#).

Gender identity

Gender Identity is related to childhood sexuality and is described as “one’s internal sense of being male, female or neither of these, both or another gender(s)” (TSER, 2015). Therefore, gender identity is not solidified based on someone’s sex assigned at birth. Consider the following scenario about a social gender transition:

Scenario: a social gender transition

Social gender transition refers to a change in some, or all, of the following: name, dress, gender pronoun, expression and, at times, legal documents (Ehrensaft, 2016; Pyne, 2014).

Rafe was assigned male at birth and is now Rina, using the pronouns ‘she’ and ‘her’. She is fascinated with traditional expressions of femininity and enjoys wearing long wigs, princess clothes, sparkly shoes and carrying a pink purse.

The RECE is perplexed because she has been working hard to break down traditional gender stereotypes and encouraging children to see gender in a neutral way. Through discussions with the educator team, Rina’s family explains they support her expressions of femininity because it enhances her mental well-being and generates a positive sense of identity for Rina.

The early-learning team engaged in critical reflection at a planning meeting and discussed some of their own experiences with gender and gender expression, sharing some of their individual beliefs about how gender should be expressed.

The RECEs critically reflected on their ideas to create gender neutral or genderless spaces. They realized that it would be important to create spaces that were balanced, where children could express gender in ways that were meaningful to them.

To support reflection and discussion on *A social gender transition*, find the scenario with questions at the end of this resource.

Consider this resource available in multiple languages to help you better understand gender and ways to explain it to others: [The Gender Unicorn](#).

Body and body image

In the early years, children begin to develop an understanding of their bodies, which includes the way they see their physical bodies, also known as body image. A child’s body image emerges and is influenced by many factors, such as interactions with family, peers and the media, descriptions they receive (positive and negative) from others about themselves, and messages they receive about what may be perceived socially and culturally as healthy bodies.

Check out the *From smiles to tears* scenario below, as well as these recommended [24-Hour Movement Guidelines](#) and this resource on [Healthy Living Healthy Children](#) to support your learning and understanding.

The actions taken by RECEs, families and others in the community can affect a child's experiences today and have impacts that last well into their future. Regardless of the leadership role you play, when considering what's important to families, children should learn they're important. Whether working directly or indirectly with children, those involved in the learning programs or in setting policies for those programs have the power to support positive identity development, well-being and overall child development.

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

Download the Pause and Reflect on:

- How bias can influence practice ([Word](#) | [PDF](#))

Download these Scenarios to support your understanding of the impact of bias and practices on identity development:

- *My hair, my crown! The following days* ([Word](#) | [PDF](#))
- *My name is Sanjiv* ([Word](#) | [PDF](#))
- *Look at me!* ([Word](#) | [PDF](#))
- *Mariam wears a hijab, too!* ([Word](#) | [PDF](#))
- *A social gender transition* ([Word](#) | [PDF](#))
- *From smiles to tears* ([Word](#) | [PDF](#))