Professional Advisory: Practices that harm children

Professional advisories are developed for Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs). They communicate important legal requirements that RECEs must know and understand. Publishing this resource is part of the College of Early Childhood Educators' (the College) ongoing commitment to advise RECEs on their roles and responsibilities set out through legislation (laws).

The purpose of this professional advisory is to clearly communicate practices that harm children in early learning environments and which violate:

- The Professional Misconduct Regulation under the *Early Childhood Educators Act*, 2007 (ECE Act);
- Section 48 of Ontario Regulation 137/15 (General) of the *Child Care and Early Years Act*, 2014 (CCEYA); and
- The College's *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice*.

This professional advisory will:

- Outline legislation that identifies actions and behaviours by RECEs that are not allowed when interacting with children;
- Describe harmful behaviours and provide examples of what they look like in practice; and
- Explain the consequences of an RECE's conduct that is harmful to children or puts them at risk of harm.

It is not intended to provide specific legal advice.

How to use this professional advisory:

- **Explore the content at your own pace:** Take time to read through the examples of practices that harm, reflect on why they are harmful and consider alternative supportive approaches. Use the hyperlinks and additional resources to deepen your understanding and application in practice.

- **Review in collaboration with other College resources:** Review the professional advisory in connection with the *Reflection Guide: Practices that Harm Children* (publication pending), the *Practice Guideline: Supporting Positive Interactions with Children* and other related resources to support a holistic understanding of positive and respectful interactions with children, and to strengthen knowledge of approaches that promote children's well-being, belonging and sense of security.

- **Engage in collaborative inquiry and reflection:** Use the resource as a starting point for discussions during a staff or team meeting, in a community of practice, or with a mentor, student or professional friend.

- **Policy review or development:** Use information in this resource to support the development or review of workplace policies or family handbooks.

- **An activity for your CPL Portfolio:** Read and reflect on this resource and consider the scenarios in the Reflection Guide (publication pending) as activities for your CPL Portfolio. Use the printable/downloadable tables and your notes/reflections as your forms of documentation.

- **Support conversations with families:** Use the content to inform and guide conversations with families and caregivers.

- **Support with onboarding processes:** Include the resource in, and/or use the content to inform, onboarding packages for new staff, placement students and/or volunteers.

- **Download and/or print the tables:** Consider downloading or printing the tables of practices that harm children and violate the Code and Standards separately for quick access, to post on a bulletin board or for other purposes.
  - Click here to download the tables

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There were many individuals and communities who shared valuable insights and knowledge which helped shape this Professional Advisory. Thank you for your contributions and support.

Introduction

An RECE's first responsibility is always to the children; they have an ethical and professional responsibility to prioritize the well-being, learning and care of children (Ethic A). Guided by the profession's values of care, respect, trust and integrity, RECEs engage in supportive and respectful interactions with children to ensure they feel a sense of security and belonging (Standard I: C.2). As such, RECEs treat each child in their care with dignity and respect – regardless of the child's behaviour, abilities, culture, race, age, environment or other influencing factors.

When working with and caring for children, RECEs encounter emotional, stressful and challenging situations. Children's holistic development is ongoing, diverse, and influences how they learn and interpret the world. This development brings a wide range of emotions, including excitement, frustration, pride, sadness, and curiosity, to name a few. RECEs have a responsibility to remain present, attuned and responsive to children's strengths and needs, building meaningful relationships that support co-regulation and the development of positive social behaviours (Standard I: C.1, C4).

Any form of physical, verbal, psychological or emotional abuse is unacceptable and constitutes professional misconduct (Professional Misconduct Regulation). Practices that aim to correct, control, coerce, or punish children's behaviour are also unacceptable, as they violate children's rights and the Code and Standards.

Keeping children safe from harm is a shared responsibility. All RECEs have an ethical duty to protect children and have a legal obligation to report concerns that a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm to a Children's Aid Society (CAS). Being accountable is part of being a professional; RECEs who behave in ways that harm children will be held responsible under the ECE Act.

Professional Misconduct Regulation

“RECEs are knowledgeable about current legislation, policies and procedures that are relevant to their professional practice and to the care and education of children” (Standard IV: B.1)

Ontario regulation 223/08: Professional Misconduct under the ECE Act outlines conduct or acts by RECEs that constitute professional misconduct. Some examples of behaviours that would constitute professional misconduct are:

- Verbally, physically, psychologically and/or emotionally abusing a child who is under the member’s professional supervision;
- Failing to maintain the standards of the profession (e.g., Code and Standards or other relevant standards);
- Acting or failing to act in a way which, in context, would reasonably be seen by other RECEs as disgraceful, dishonourable or unprofessional;
- Breaking a law, if that action has caused or may cause a child who is under the member’s professional supervision to be put at or remain at risk of harm;
- Behaving in a manner that is unbecoming of a member; and
- Behaving in a manner that exposes any person to hatred based on discrimination as defined under the Human Rights Code.

The ECE Act states that professional misconduct also includes sexual abuse of a child and related sexual offences, which are also likely to be criminal offences and lead to revocation of a certificate of registration. This professional advisory intentionally focuses on physical, verbal, psychological and emotional abuse that is not sexual abuse. All RECEs are required to complete the College’s mandatory Sexual Abuse Prevention Program, as part of the Continuous Professional Learning Program.

Child Care and Early Years Act

The *Child Care and Early Years Act*, 2014 (CCEYA), including its regulations, is the legislation that governs child care in Ontario. Its purpose is to foster the learning, development, health and well-being of children, and to enhance their safety. It establishes rules and standards for areas such as ratios (e.g., employees to children, percentage of qualified employees), program quality and policies, and appropriate and inappropriate interactions with children. The CCEYA applies to the following settings:

- licensed child care centres, including licensed before- and after-school programs
- licensed home child care
- unlicensed child care
- EarlyON Child and Family Centres

Prohibited Practices

Section 48 of Ontario Regulation 137/15 (CCEYA) outlines practices with children that are strictly prohibited in licensed child care settings, whether committed by RECEs, other staff, students or volunteers, including individuals with a Ministry of Education director approval, early childhood assistants and early childhood education program students. The prohibited practices exist to protect children's safety, well-being and dignity while they are being cared for in these settings. The prohibited practices align with behaviours that violate the Code and Standards and ensure that children's rights are upheld in terms of being respected, valued, supported and treated with care and compassion. The prohibited practices are summarized in the following section.

Practices that harm children and violate the Code and Standards

This section contains content regarding different types of abuse and behaviours that harm children and may be upsetting to some people.

The tables on the following pages highlight behaviours that harm children and violate the Code and Standards. **These behaviours are not acceptable by any RECE, regardless of their role or practice setting** (e.g., child and family support programs, home child care, child care centres, kindergarten programs, extended day programs, etc.). **These practices are not appropriate, nor effective in supporting or guiding children of any age, under any circumstance.** Engaging in any of these practices, whether intending to cause harm or not, fails to maintain the standards of the profession and may be considered professional misconduct (Professional Misconduct Regulation).

While primarily addressing the practice of RECEs, the behaviours listed below are **unacceptable in early learning and care environments by any individual**, including other staff, students and volunteers. Review the section on Reporting Obligations for more information on what to do if you observe these practices.

The tables present each type of abuse noted in the Professional Misconduct Regulation separately, but it is important to recognize that the different types of abuse are often interconnected. It is possible that children who are harmed experience more than one type of abuse at the same time (e.g., physical and emotional/psychological abuse often co-exist).

Note: The descriptions of behaviours and examples below are not exhaustive but have been informed by real cases and highlight common ways practices that harm children may occur. They are listed in no particular order.

Supporting children with disabilities

Children with disabilities in early learning environments are among the most vulnerable to being excluded, singled out as problematic or subjected to inappropriate and harmful practices. While RECEs are expected to support the inclusion of all children, research indicates that educators are not always comfortable working with children with disabilities and often feel they lack the knowledge, skills and experience to effectively support children with disabilities. Systemic barriers, stress and an RECE's own beliefs about inclusion or disability in general, all have the potential to translate into harmful practices in response to children and their behaviour. Engaging in ongoing critical reflection, professional learning and seeking support when needed, are crucial in ensuring that all children are treated with respect, dignity and feel a true sense of belonging. To learn more, read the *Practice Guideline: Inclusion of Children with Disabilities*.

Verbally abusing a child who is under the member's professional supervision

Professional Misconduct Regulation, section 2, subsection 3

Examples of behaviours that harm children and violate the Code and Standards, and how they may be seen in practice:

- **Using a raised voice or harsh tone to reprimand, scold or redirect a behaviour.**
- **Yelling, screaming or swearing at a child or group of children.**
- **Making negative or derogatory comments towards a child or when speaking about a child or their loved ones.**
  - Saying to a child, "I hope your mom doesn't pick you up today, I don't want to deal with her" or speaking with a colleague about how bothersome a child is around the group of children.
  - Referring to a child's parent(s) as ''dirty" or "drug addict(s)".
- **Name calling, negatively labelling or insulting a child or group of children.**
  - Calling a child "bad", "stupid", "dumb", "a pain", "difficult", "lazy", "handsy", "gross", "slow", "annoying", "a bully", "a bad listener", "a brat", or other degrading terms.
  - Referring to a group of children as the troublemakers.
  - Referring to a child with a disability as "special", or "always needing help."
- **Using scare tactics or threatening a child.**
  - Saying to a child, "If you don't listen, I'll call your parents and they won't come pick you up" or "If you don't stop doing that, the police will come take you away."
  - Saying to a child who is crying, "I'll take you to the infant room if you keep crying."
- **Publicly embarrassing, shaming, blaming or speaking badly about a child.**
  - Singling out a child in front of others to ensure their behaviour is visible to all. For example, when a child has had a toileting accident, or spilled their drink.
  - Saying to a child in front of everyone, "You always make us late for outside."
  - Saying to a child, "Look at what you did, now everyone is upset because of you."
  - Saying to a colleague in front of others, "Why does he have long hair?", or "Why is his hair in braids?"
- **Mocking or making fun of a child or group of children.**
  - Making fun of a child who can't tie their shoelaces or mocking the way a child mispronounces a word.
- **Belittling or making negative comparisons about a child.**
  - Saying to a child, "Why can't you listen like everyone else and put your coat on?" or "Why are you always the last person to finish your food?"
  - Saying to a colleague in front of others, "Why do they call everyone their auntie or uncle?" or "How is this other child their uncle when they're the same age?"
- **Dismissing a child's feelings in a harsh or degrading way.**
  - Saying to a child, "Stop crying, you're acting like a baby," or "Get over it, it's not a big deal."

The CCEYA reinforces that it is prohibited to use threats or derogatory language directed at or used in the presence of a child in a way that would humiliate, shame or frighten them or undermine their self-respect, dignity or self-worth.

Click here to download the tables

Practising within the parameters of professional knowledge and experience

"RECEs practise within the parameters of their professional knowledge and competence. Prior to engaging in new or specialized areas of practice or returning after a substantial time away from an area of practice, RECEs assess their knowledge and competence and seek appropriate training, ongoing professional learning or other support" (Standard IV: C.12).

Challenges of balancing individual and collective needs of children

RECEs observe children to identify individual and group needs, as well as respond to the uniqueness of individuals and groups of children (Standard II: C.1; C.4). These responsibilities require RECEs to critically reflect on the important distinction between inclusive practices, approaches and strategies that are grounded in ethical principles and professional standards that support all children in an environment, versus truly individualized, specialized strategies that have been developed for a specific child, in collaboration with a multidisciplinary team (i.e., resource consultants, educational assistants, special education resource teachers, occupational therapists, cultural leaders or other regulated professionals).

Inclusive practice includes being attentive to the capabilities, personalities and circumstances of all children and understanding the diversity of development of all children (Code and Standards). There may be instances where an individualized child guidance strategy is inclusive and beneficial to all children in an environment. For example, in collaboration with a resource consultant, an RECE develops a strategy for a child that includes a personalized visual schedule to support transitions throughout the day. While designed to meet this specific child's needs, it becomes clear to the educators that this strategy would be beneficial to all the children, and through critical reflection and collaboration, they introduce this strategy to the whole group.

In contrast, there are truly individualized, specialized strategies that are designed for children with complex needs or those requiring high supports. These specialized child guidance strategies are developed in collaboration with a multidisciplinary team and are not meant to be used broadly with all children. For example, a resource consultant and occupational therapist collaboratively recommend the use of a weighted blanket for an individual child to support with self-regulation.

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With the family's consent, the RECE uses the weighted blanket for this one child. However, over time, the RECE begins applying the same "heavy pressure" strategy by using weighted objects to restrain other children in the room who are having difficulty with self-regulation. This is an example where a truly individualized strategy begins to be used broadly without consultation and causes harm to the children for whom it was never designed or recommended.

Misapplying specialized strategies and using them as general guidance strategies or trying strategies that are not within the scope of practice are examples of harmful practices and could be considered professional misconduct.

Regardless of the practice environment, RECEs must critically reflect on the strategies they are using and engage in ongoing collaboration to access available supports within their organization and in the community to address the needs of each child while considering full group dynamics. For more information, review the *Practice Guideline: Supporting Positive Interactions with Children* and the *Practice Guideline: Inclusion of Children with Disabilities*.

Physically abusing a child who is under the member's professional supervision

Professional Misconduct Regulation, section 2, subsection 3.1

Examples of behaviours that harm children, violate the Code and Standards and how they may be seen in practice:

- **Pinching, spanking, striking, hitting, kicking, punching, biting or flicking a child on any part of their body.**
  - Striking an infant's diaper or spanking a child on their bottom.
  - Biting a child back after they've bitten you or another person to show them what it feels like.
- **Shaking, shoving, grabbing or roughly handling a child.**
  - Shaking an infant because they won't stop crying.
  - Shoving a child ahead because they won't line up.
  - Pinning a child's hands to their sides to stop them from hitting or as a strategy to stop stimming (self-stimulation, a form of emotional regulation).
  - Grabbing a child to pick them up and move them to where you want them to go or grabbing a child's wrist to stop them from splashing water.
  - Lifting a child from their wheelchair to the floor without explanation or checking in with the child first.
- **Forcing a child to stop speaking, crying, yelling, swearing or to be quiet.**
  - Putting your hand or an object over a child's mouth.
- **Swatting or hitting a child with an object of any sort.**
  - Swatting a child back with a toy after they hit another child to show them what it feels like.

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Physically abusing a child who is under the member's professional supervision

Professional Misconduct Regulation, section 2, subsection 3.1

- **Pulling or dragging a child by their hair, body parts (e.g., arms, ears, wrists, ankles) or clothing.**
  - Dragging a child by their hand so they can keep up with an adult's walking pace.
  - Pulling a child by their shirt to move them to the snack table because they're having difficulty with the transition.
  - Pulling a child's ears to get their attention or re-direct their behaviour.
- **Holding, pushing, wrapping, or physically forcing a child to sit, lay down or stay still with any body part (e.g., your hands, arms, legs) or object (e.g., blanket, article of clothing).**
  - Physically holding a child down with your leg or a blanket on their bed at rest time because they aren't sleeping or staying still.
  - Holding a child down by their shoulders because they won't sit crossed legged or sit still.
  - Sitting on a child's feet or hands to stop them from moving around.
  - Holding a child on your lap and restraining them with your arms to make them pay attention during circle time or an activity.
  - Wrapping your legs around a child during circle time because they're "a runner."
- **Forcing a child to hold an uncomfortable or painful position for a period of time.**
  - Forcing a child to stand while everyone else gets to sit at circle time as a form of discipline.
  - Making a child stand outside in winter conditions because they didn't put their boots on.
- **Holding onto any part of a child's body (e.g., hands, arms, shoulders) or clothing as they try to pull away from you.**
  - Restraining a child with your arms to make them stop running around the classroom.
  - Restraining a child by holding onto their wrists until they stop crying.
- **Forcing or demanding eye contact from a child when you're speaking.**
  - Holding a child's face or body so that they must face you while you are speaking to them.
  - Saying to a child, "Look at me when I'm speaking to you!"
- **Strapping a child onto a chair/change table with any sort of material (e.g., string, ribbon, tape, scarfs etc.) or leaving a child in a crib or strapped in stroller, highchair, booster seat or car seat as a form of discipline or in lieu of supervision.**
  - Leaving a child strapped in a highchair while everyone else leaves the lunch table for play time because they were throwing food during mealtime.
  - Using tape to strap a child in their chair because they keep moving around during an activity.
- **Ignoring a child's food requirements (e.g., allergies, sensitivity, cultural, sensory issues, general preference).**
  - Forcing a child to try a food they do not like or that they are sensitive to.
  - Feeding a child a food they can't eat for cultural reasons because you don't have any other options in the room at the moment.

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Physically abusing a child who is under the member's professional supervision

Professional Misconduct Regulation, section 2, subsection 3.1

- **Forcing a child to finish their food or drink.**
  - Physically holding down a child in their seat until they finish their meal.
  - Shoving food in a child's mouth against their will.
- **Refusing to change a child or support a child who has soiled themselves.**
  - Refusing to support a child who has soiled themselves because of a no-touch workplace policy.
  - Leaving a child in their soiled clothing to teach them a lesson for having an accident.
- **Sending a child outside without appropriate clothing for the weather condition.**
  - Not letting a child wear their winter coat for outdoor play to teach them a lesson for taking it off outside the day before.
  - Throwing a child's winter clothes outside with them because they didn't want to get dressed inside.
  - Taping a child's hat, mittens or any other clothing to them so they can't remove the clothing item.
- **Not following a child's individualized safety/support plan or broadly applying strategies from a child's individualized safety/support plan without consultation.**
  - Using a "heavy pressure" strategy with other children, that is specifically designed for a child with complex needs.
  - Ignoring a 1:1 supervision requirement from a child's safety plan.
  - Requesting a child with a physical disability to perform a physical task without their planned supports.
  - Making a child/family continuously request supports they are entitled to.

The CCEYA reinforces that the following practices are prohibited when interacting with children:

- Physically restraining a child for the purposes of discipline or in lieu of supervision, unless the physical restraint is for the purpose of **preventing a child from hurting themselves or someone else, is used as a last resort and is stopped immediately once the risk of harm has passed**;
- Inflicting any bodily harm on children including making children eat or drink against their will; and
- Corporal punishment of a child[1].

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[1] The College views corporal punishment of a child as any physical action whether intended or not, that causes pain or discomfort as a form of discipline, correction or redirecting behaviour.

Canada's history with corporal punishment of children in Indian Residential Schools

Indigenous children in Indian Residential Schools suffered years of abuse at the hands of school staff who used corporal punishment, often justified as "discipline" and coupled with public humiliation, "in their mission to 'civilize' Indigenous children" (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC), 2015, p. 144). As a result of the widespread physical, sexual and psychological abuse, many children died and those who survived were devastatingly harmed. The impacts of the abuse in Indian Residential schools affected the children, their families and communities, and continues today through intergenerational trauma (TRCC, 2015).

To learn more about Canada's history with corporal punishment and the calls to action for truth and reconciliation, read the *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, 2015.

Additionally, on an international level, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child prohibits corporal punishment of children in all settings, recognizing it as a violation of a child's human dignity and right to physical integrity (World Health Organization, 2025).

Psychologically or emotionally abusing a child who is under the member's professional supervision

Professional Misconduct Regulation, section 2, subsection 3.2

Examples of behaviours that harm children, violate the Code and Standards and how they may be seen in practice:

- **Isolating a child.**
  - Putting a child in a time-out or sending them for "renewal time."
  - Removing a child with a disability from an activity because they were being "too loud."
  - Sending a child to go sit on a chair to think about their behaviour.
  - Sending a child to another classroom or to go stand in the hall because of their behaviour.
- **Taking away, threatening to take away, or refusing to provide a comfort item (e.g., blanket, soother, stuffed animal).**
  - Taking away a child's soother as a form of discipline.
  - Threatening to take away a child's stuffed animal during rest time if they keep making noise.
- **Denying a child or group of children access to a learning activity as a form of discipline.**
  - Not allowing a child to engage in a specific activity as punishment for something they did earlier.
  - Telling a child they can't play with a certain toy if they can't keep their hands to themselves.
  - Not allowing a child access to the water table because they were splashing the other children last time.
  - Cancelling a group outing because of a few children's behaviour.
- **Denying a child access to a preferred caregiver as a form of discipline.**
  - Not allowing a child to be comforted by your colleague because they were hitting other children that day.
  - Purposefully ignoring a child's cries for a particular caregiver.
- **Using offensive or inappropriate hand gestures.**
  - Gesturing the middle finger to a child behind their back.
  - Snapping or clapping your hands in front of a child's face because they're not listening.
  - Raising your hands at a child.
- **Punishing or threatening a child for not eating.**
  - Saying to a child, "You're not allowed to leave the table until you finish your food" or "If you don't eat everything, you won't get any food next time."
- **Denying or removing a child's basic needs for rest time (e.g., sheet, blanket, cot, pillow).**
  - Refusing to give a child a sheet and/or blanket during rest time.
  - Removing a child's sheet, blanket or pillow during rest time because they're not lying down.

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Psychologically or emotionally abusing a child who is under the member's professional supervision

Professional Misconduct Regulation, section 2, subsection 3.2

- **Denying a child access to food or drink (e.g., snack, lunch, water) as a form of discipline.**
  - Telling a child they're not getting any fruit after lunch because they weren't nice to their friends this morning.
  - Refusing to provide a child with a drink because they kept spilling it last meal.
  - Denying access to water for the purpose of drinking.
- **Purposefully keeping a child awake.**
  - Forcing a child to stay awake during rest time because they didn't want to sleep the day before.
  - Purposefully keeping a child awake when they are visibly tired and falling asleep because their family has requested the child doesn't nap to prepare for Kindergarten.
- **Ignoring, delaying or refusing to allow a child to use the toilet or potty.**
  - Telling a child they can't go potty because they just went.
  - Delaying a child with a disability or a child who is in the process of learning toileting skills access to the toilet because they are wearing a diaper.
- **Leaving a child unsupervised (e.g., outdoors or in isolated spaces such as an office, bathroom, storage room) as a form of discipline.**
  - Leaving a child outside to teach them a lesson because they refused to line up with the group.
  - Leaving a child inside in the dressing area alone until they put their shoes on.
- **Rejecting or ignoring a child's needs or withholding affection, attention or comfort as a form of discipline.**
  - Refusing to acknowledge or speak to a child because they didn't clean up the toys earlier that day.
  - Ignoring a child who is crying because they "cry over everything."
- **Encouraging or allowing violent interactions between children.**
  - Encouraging a child to hit another child back after they were hit.
  - Purposefully ignoring a child who is pulling another child's hair because they need to see what it feels like.
- **Using a child's known trigger or fear to scare or coerce them into doing something.**
  - Turning off the lights without warning when a child has a known fear of the dark because they're refusing to line up.
  - Telling a child who has a fear of being left alone that if they get up one more time from their chair, they're going to eat alone in the hallway.

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Psychologically or emotionally abusing a child who is under the member's professional supervision

Professional Misconduct Regulation, section 2, subsection 3.2

- **Denying a child of cultural resources and/or practices.**
  - Refusing to let an Indigenous child bring their sacred medicines into the program.
  - Asking an Indigenous child to not smudge before coming to program because the smell bothers other children.
  - Discouraging a child from speaking their home language in program.
  - Dismissing or discouraging a child from engaging in cultural practices (i.e., prayers, fasting, signing) during program.
  - Cutting a child's hair.
- **Denying a child's identity and self-expression.**
  - Refusing to call a child by their chosen name or pronouns.
  - Discouraging gender diverse play in program (i.e., telling a boy he shouldn't wear a dress).
  - Not using a child's true or traditional name.
- **Engaging in unprofessional or unethical practices in front of the children.**
  - Having an argument with another adult (colleague, parent) in front of the children.
  - Speaking badly about a workplace policy or practice in front of the children.
  - Abusing your position of power by telling a child they need to listen because you are in charge and you said so.
  - Stomping or walking aggressively towards a child or group of children.

The CCEYA reinforces that it is prohibited to engage in the following practices when interacting with children:

- Using harsh or degrading measures in a way that would humiliate, shame or frighten a child or undermine their self-respect, dignity or self-worth;
- Depriving a child of basic needs including food, drink, shelter, sleep, toilet use, clothing or bedding; and
- Locking the exits of the child care centre or home child care premises for the purpose of confining a child or to substitute supervision, or confining a child in an area or room without adult supervision.

Click here to download the tables

The effects of harmful practices on children's well-being and development

The practices noted in the tables above can result in early childhood trauma, which can lead to adverse childhood experiences and toxic stress later in life (Public Health Ontario, 2020). Even a single brief incident, whether directed at a child or happening in their presence, can cause harm and be considered abusive. It does not have to be a pattern of conduct or a prolonged incident to have a serious impact.

Some behaviours listed under verbal, psychological and emotional abuse, such as name calling or isolating a child from an activity or group, may not appear to cause immediate harm, but these practices **are damaging and can have negative long-term effects on a child's self-esteem, emotional development, and their sense of safety, worth and belonging**. For example, new research has found that verbal abuse reshapes brain development, altering the part of the brain that allows children to feel safe, build relationships, find joy and connections. Verbal abuse profoundly affects children and significantly increases risk of mental health and challenges with building and maintaining relationships later in life (University College London, 2025).

Lastly, children may be experiencing challenges or negative treatment in other environments and engaging in any of these practices can worsen existing trauma and negative impacts on a child.

Educator mental health, well-being and professional supports

RECEs play a critical role in caring for and supporting the well-being of children and families – work that is emotionally demanding and often stressful. Current sector realities and challenges have added to this pressure, increasing stressors faced by RECEs. Additionally, RECEs today are increasingly supporting multiple children with high needs in environments that are often under-resourced and stressful.

It is essential for RECEs to spend time nurturing their own mental health and well-being to ensure they can be responsive and supportive to those they care for and work with. This includes recognizing and managing their own stress responses in the moment, as self-regulation is critical to maintaining safe, supportive and respectful interactions with children and colleagues. Cultivating self-awareness is an important part of this process and a key element of professional relationships (*Practice Note: Professional Relationships*). "When we become consciously alert to our physical, mental, and emotional reactions in different situations, we can observe how we respond to challenges and stress" (NAEYC, 2021).

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In addition, having an awareness of and reflecting on how one's own lived experiences, related to upbringing or trauma for example, impact our feelings and reactions is critical to fostering environments where children feel safe and secure. For more information, check out Your Brain at Work, where Dr. Jean Clinton shares information with RECEs on identifying their own triggers, managing stress and what they can do to have a healthy brain.

It's also critical that RECEs and early learning staff are seeking out professional supports that are available to them, both in the moment and within their communities. While working with children is meaningful work, it's also challenging, and it is not meant to be done alone. Educators require a support system, too. Whether this looks like recognizing when to call for support in moments of frustration, stress or overwhelm, practising mindfulness strategies as a team, reflecting on and co-creating strategies for supporting children as a team, or engaging and collaborating with community resource partners, these are all effective strategies in building capacity and confidence to support positive and respectful interactions with children.

How implicit bias shapes educators' responses to children's behaviour

It's important for RECEs to be aware of how their beliefs and biases influence their thinking, professional judgment, decision-making, and ultimately, their practice and interactions with children.

Implicit bias refers to the automatic and unconscious beliefs, attitudes or stereotypes that shape and impact our understanding, actions and decisions. They may even conflict with our declared beliefs and how we see ourselves (CPSO, 2020). Implicit bias impacts all aspects of life and is very important for RECEs to consider, as these biases contribute to inequities in how educators care for and respond to children. These responses are often shaped by factors such as race, culture, religion, gender and ability.

Some examples of how implicit bias and systemic racism affect an educator's interactions with children in early learning environments are provided below. For those who wish to learn further, links to full academic articles are included:

- **Increased monitoring and questioning:** Black children, particularly boys, are monitored more closely for "bad behaviour," compared to their white peers (Hathaway, 2016).

- **Disproportionate discipline practices:** Black children experience "over-punishment and maltreatment" by educators, compared to their white peers (Stirling-Cameron et al., 2023; James and Turner, 2017).
- "**Preschool-to-prison pipeline**": Disproportionate discipline practices in early learning environments contribute to the preschool to prison pipeline, which is the systemic practices and policies that disproportionately push Black, Indigenous and children with disabilities out of educational environments and toward the criminal justice system. It begins in early learning environments with punitive disciplinary measures like suspension and expulsion, often for minor incidents, contributing to academic disengagement, lower educational outcomes and increased interaction with law enforcement later in life (James and Turner, 2017).
- **Adultification bias:** Black children are routinely held to adult standards and are more likely to be held accountable for their actions, while white children are given the benefit of being innocent, curious children (Goff et al., 2014 as cited in Brennan, 2022).
- **Negative labelling of behaviour:** Black, Indigenous, children of colour and children with disabilities are more likely to have negative interpretations or labels placed on their behaviour and actions (e.g., aggressive, defiant, difficult, a burden). As a result, educators may be more likely to respond with discipline, rather than support, positive guidance or care, whereas the same behaviours in white children are often overlooked or met with understanding (James and Turner, 2017; Brennan, 2022).

RECEs have an ethical responsibility to be equitable, inclusive and respectful of diversity (Standard I: C.5). To uphold this responsibility to children and families, **RECEs need to critically reflect on how their beliefs and biases influence every aspect of their professional practice**. Recognizing and addressing implicit bias is an ongoing and lifelong process that requires increased self-awareness, critical self-reflection, ongoing professional (un)learning, and implementing anti-racist, anti-oppressive, anti-bias and culturally relevant practices and policies.

For more information and guidance on reflecting on beliefs and biases in relation to disability, family structure, gender, immigration, language, legal status, race and religion consult the following College resources: *Practice Note: Beliefs and Biases*, *Reflection Guide: Beliefs and Biases* and the *Practice Guideline: Diversity and Culture*.

Reporting Obligations

Everyone in an early learning and care setting has an immediate duty to report to a Children's Aid Society (CAS) if they have reasonable grounds to suspect that a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm or injury under the *Child, Youth and Family Services Act*, 2017 (CYFSA). The CYFSA notes that RECEs have a particular duty to report because of their professional responsibilities. While RECEs must also be familiar with their employer's policies on reporting child abuse, they are obligated to follow the CYFSA. Failure to report suspected harm or risk of harm can result in an RECE being held legally responsible for not upholding the duty to report under the CYFSA, and they can be found guilty of professional misconduct (Professional Misconduct Regulation).

In addition to the immediate duty to report, it's important that RECEs are aware of other reporting obligations. If an RECE has a concern about the conduct of:

- another RECE, they must also submit a complaint to the College, and should submit a complaint to the Ministry of Education.
- a colleague who is not an RECE (including other staff, students and volunteers), they should submit a complaint to the Ministry of Education.

Employers must also file reports with the College when they suspend, impose restrictions on, or terminate an RECE's employment for reasons of professional misconduct through Mandatory Employer Reports (MER). Additionally, employers of licensed centres/programs must also file a serious occurrence with the Ministry of Education for any allegation of abuse against a staff (RECE or other individual).

An RECE's first responsibility is always to the safety and well-being of children (Ethic A). This is a shared responsibility and includes offering support, guidance or coaching to a colleague who may be engaging in a questionable or potentially harmful practice with a child. RECEs can use employer child guidance policies[2],the Code and Standards and College practice resources to facilitate constructive and respectful dialogue around the questionable practice(s) and ways to adapt practice.

As capable and competent leaders, RECEs also recognize when a situation requires direct intervention to protect a child, such as stepping in and offering support and redirection or calling for support or assistance.

While supporting colleagues is an important responsibility, if an RECE has a concern about the conduct of a colleague, which could create a risk to the safety, health or well-being of a child, they must report to the appropriate authorities, including a CAS.

If they are unsure whether a concern should be reported, or if they have questions related to their concern, they can and should contact a CAS or the College for guidance. **RECEs can contact a CAS or the College for a consult at any time, not only to report**.

For more information on the duty to report, including using professional judgment and ethical decision-making, read the *Professional Advisory*.

[2] If there is a conflict between the Code and Standards and an RECE's workplace policies or procedures, they have a legal obligation to comply with the Code and Standards.

Consequences for RECEs who harm children

RECEs should be aware of the consequences when they behave in ways that harm children and violate the Code and Standards and understand that the implications are serious.

As listed in the Professional Misconduct Regulation, the following are reportable behaviours which may be considered professional misconduct:

- physical, emotional, verbal and psychological abuse;
- failing to uphold the standards of the profession; and
- behaving in ways that expose any person to hatred on the basis of a prohibited ground of discrimination.

All complaints about RECEs who behave in ways that violate the Code and Standards are reviewed by the College. For less serious cases, the College may use informal resolution options such as reminders and resources letters, and practice conversations with an experienced RECE.

Complaints that don't meet the criteria for an informal resolution will be considered by the College's Complaints Committee. The ECE Act sets out the types of decisions the Complaints Committee can make:

- No further action
- Remedial education
- Verbal caution
- Referral for a hearing

In higher-risk cases involving more serious concerns, the matter may be referred to the College's Discipline Committee for a hearing. A discipline hearing may result in a finding of professional misconduct against an RECE, in which case the College's Discipline Committee may make various orders, the most serious of which is an order directing that an RECE's Certificate of Registration be revoked.

Engaging in any of the prohibited practices outlined in the CCEYA could result in the person involved being investigated by their employer or the Ministry of Education, resulting in a report being made to the College (if the individual is an RECE) and/or other authorities (e.g., CAS, police services).

Lastly, it's important for RECEs to be aware that harming a child – whether physically, emotionally or through neglect – could be a criminal offence resulting in a criminal court conviction and record.

To learn more about the College's complaints process and possible outcomes, check out some the following articles in our blog series that demystifies complaints:

- Understanding Complaints, Your Rights and Resources
- Understanding Complaints: Mandatory Employer Reports and Registrar's Complaints
- Understanding Complaints: What happens in high-risk cases and the work of the Discipline and Fitness to Practise Committees

Resources

- *Early Childhood Educators Act*, 2007
- *Child Care and Early Years Act*, 2014
- *Child Youth and Family Services Act*, 2017, section 125
- *Gaabaagang Gives Children A Space of their Own*
- *Practice Guideline: Inclusion of Children with Disabilities*
- *Practice Guideline: Supporting Positive Interactions with Children*
- *Practice Guideline: Professional Boundaries*
- *Practice Note: Beliefs and Biases*
- *Practice Note: Professional Judgment*
- *Practice Note: Professional Relationships*
- *Racism and Bias in Reporting to Child Welfare*
- *Reflection Guide: Beliefs and Biases*
- *Reflection Guide: Duty to Report*
- *Reflection Guide: Practices that harm children [pending publication]*
- United Nations Declarations on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
- Webinar: Anticipating and Preventing Challenges
- Wellness Resources

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