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Practice Note: Professional Relationships



Practice notes support Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECEs) in understanding and applying the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (Code and Standards) by examining a specific topic and providing practical guidance.

Introduction

RECEs are caring professionals who value strong, positive relationships. The Code and Standards outlines that an RECE's professional work is rooted in **building and maintaining caring and responsive relationships with children, families and colleagues** (Standard I: B.4). This professional responsibility is also reflected in other foundational guiding documents such as:

- [Early Childhood Educators Act](#), 2007 (ECE Act)
- [How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years](#)
- [The Kindergarten Program](#)

[Professional relationships](#) are formed and maintained within a range of professional settings and differing social, cultural and geographical contexts. The common thread in these relationships is the profession's core beliefs and values of **care, respect, trust and integrity**, which inform all aspects of practice, such as:

- communication and collaboration
- professional judgment and ethical decision-making
- professional supervision of children
- supporting positive interactions with children
- pedagogy and curriculum
- maintaining professional boundaries
- managing dual relationships

RECEs work in various contexts and settings across the province, and have unique realities, knowledge, skills and experiences with developing and maintaining relationships with all members of the learning community. You can use this resource to:

- support your practice of developing and maintaining caring and responsive relationships;
- consider and critically reflect on key elements of professional relationships and how they can inform and guide your practice;
- reflect on ethics of care and culturally responsive relationships; and
- learn about the importance of balance in professional relationships.

There are several sections in this practice note — start with whichever topic area catches your interest.



Maintaining professional boundaries is a critical component of caring and responsive relationships. Consult our companion resource, [Practice Guideline: Professional Boundaries](#), along with this practice note, to learn more about the important role of boundaries in the context of professional relationships.

Caring and responsive professional relationships



Developing caring, responsive relationships takes time and requires active and ongoing critical reflection but is a daily focus for RECEs. It is challenging and complex work done by highly skilled professionals and leaders.

Professional relationships in the early learning and care environment are distinct from those in other care-based professions such as nursing, social work or even teaching in a school setting. RECEs are developing unique and caring relationships that, depending on the practice environment and age of the child(ren), can have a particular level of intimacy. Early childhood educators:



- spend a lengthy amount of time with children;
- develop close, affectionate and caring relationships with children and families;
- engage in many interactions with children throughout a day, which includes caring for children’s personal care needs (i.e., holding, comforting, feeding, toileting, changing, rest time, etc.); and
- sometimes have access to intimate details and information about a child and/or a family’s personal life.

“It takes extraordinary trust to allow a stranger to have that kind of closeness with one’s child and family. Early childhood educators build that trust by ceasing to be strangers, by being human and vulnerable, and by accepting a degree of intimacy. They sustain that trust by developing good relationships and by honoring professional boundaries.”^{1(p5)}





Ethics of care

Care and relationship work is challenging, complex and is a valued practice by RECEs.

The divide between education and care work, with the greater emphasis on education, has led to the minimization of care work.² Dominant messages and perspectives about care work perpetuate the idea that caring comes naturally to women, particularly racialized women, and ignores the critical thinking, reflection, professional judgment and ethical decision-making required in care and relationship work.³ These misconceptions contribute to devaluing the practice of early childhood education and care as professional work.⁴

Challenging these misconceptions is crucial for repositioning and reclaiming care as being fundamentally linked with education, and appreciating the complexity, professional knowledge and critical thinking involved in nurturing relationships with children, families and colleagues.⁵ By prioritizing care in their professional relationships, RECEs can better support children's holistic development, fostering a sense of security, inclusion and belonging for all.





Culturally responsive relationships

Co-creating inclusive environments that respect the diversity of communities, nations, cultures, backgrounds and social structures is an important professional responsibility for RECEs.

The Code and Standards states that RECEs respond to the uniqueness of individuals and groups of children. They identify appropriate strategies, access the necessary resources and design curriculum to ensure full participation of all children, taking into account ability, cultural and linguistic diversity and Indigenous identity. They provide all children with opportunities for engagement, exploration and expression (Standard II: C.4).



One way to become aware of what makes people and communities unique is by developing strong, trusting professional relationships with them. RECEs can:

- learn relevant information about someone’s experiences from their perspective at a pace they’re comfortable with;
- recognize that some members of the learning community may not be comfortable disclosing information and details about their lives that aren’t relevant to the professional context; and
- be mindful of obvious and underlying power dynamics that exist in society and be careful not to push their own beliefs on others.

Research highlights the importance of critical reflection and ongoing learning in relationship-building with First Nation, Inuit, and Métis children, families and communities. Educators should intentionally and regularly reflect on and challenge assumptions and stereotypes they may hold. This process is essential for developing authentic and trusting relationships, which are crucial for advancing Reconciliation.^{6,7,8}

Read the [Practice Guideline: Diversity and Culture](#) for more guidance on developing culturally responsive relationships.

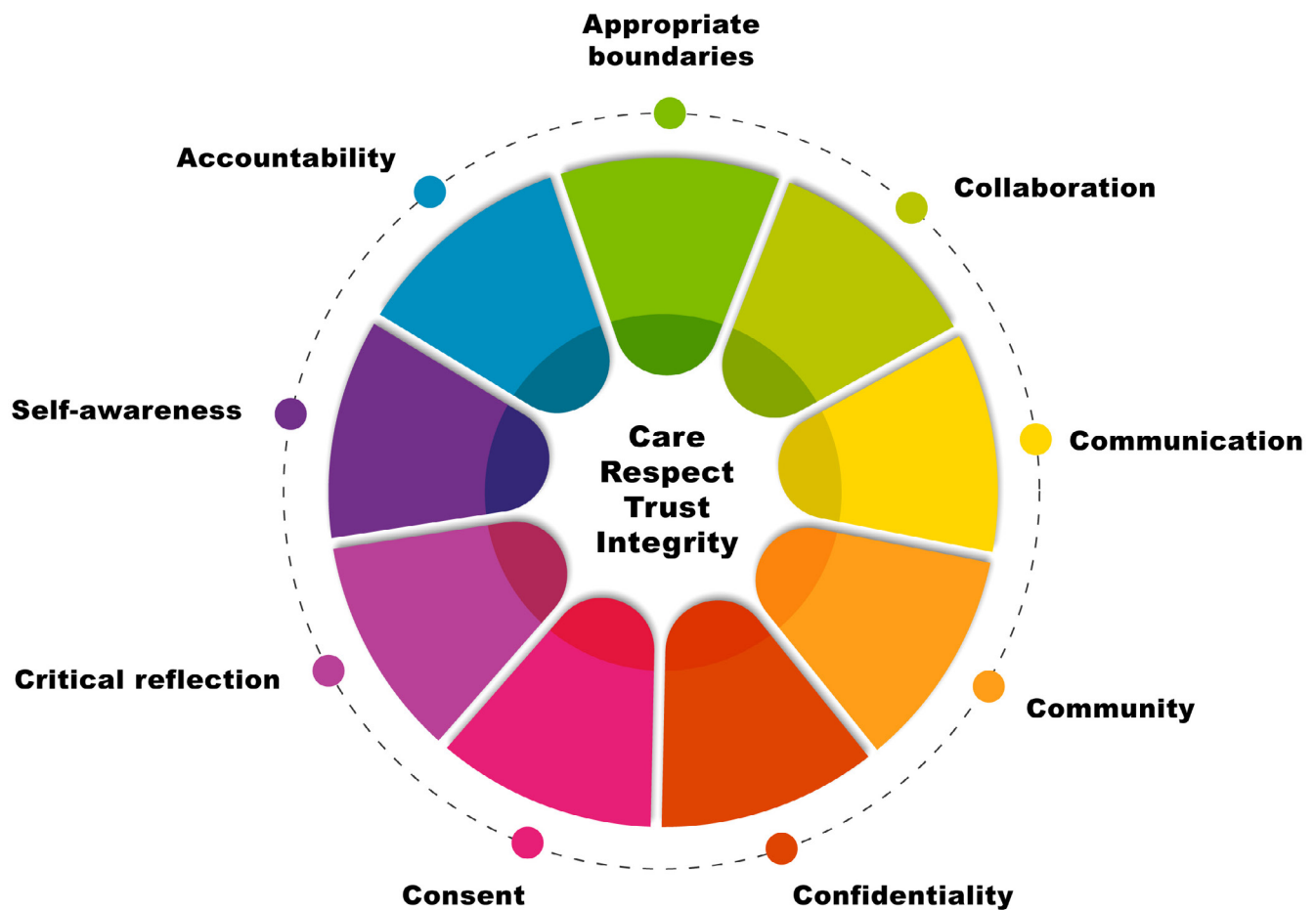


Check out this short video on [how the Code and Standards outlines caring and responsive relationships](#).

Key Elements of Professional Relationships

While care and responsiveness are at the core of an RECE's practice, there are other key elements that support the development and maintenance of professional relationships.

Informed by the [Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice](#), the elements reflected in the graphic below are grounded in the values of the profession (care, respect, trust and integrity) and foster equity, diversity and inclusion.





Accountability

Caring and responsive relationships are developed and maintained by accountable professionals who take personal responsibility for their practice decisions, actions and interactions with others. RECEs demonstrate accountability in their professional relationships and practice by modelling professional values, beliefs and behaviours with children, families and colleagues at all times (Standard IV: C.4).

Appropriate boundaries

Caring and responsive relationships with children, families and colleagues exist within appropriate professional boundaries which are established and maintained by RECEs (Standard V: B.1). Setting and maintaining boundaries is essential to being a professional and protecting the integrity of professional relationships. Appropriate boundaries ensure clarity in an RECE's role and support the best interests of *everyone* in the environment. Read our [Practice Guideline: Professional Boundaries](#) to learn more.

Collaboration

Caring and responsive relationships involve ongoing collaboration with children, families, colleagues and the community. RECEs build and maintain collaborative relationships and work in partnership with families by exchanging knowledge and resources to support the well-being and learning of children (Ethic B). RECEs also support, encourage and work collaboratively with colleagues, including students aspiring to the profession (Standard I: C.6; Ethic B).



Communication

Ongoing, effective, clear and respectful communication with people in the practice environment is an RECE's professional duty. Communication in relationships can occur in various ways (i.e., verbal, written, non-verbal, listening), and RECEs must consider privacy, confidentiality, appropriate boundaries and approaches that respect equity, diversity and inclusion (Standard I: C.5, C.6). Read our [*Practice Guideline: Communication and Collaboration*](#) to explore this topic further.

Community

RECEs value the role of all members of their early learning and care community – the children, families, colleagues, and other adults in the environment. They understand that families are of primary importance in children's development and well-being and that children are best understood in the context of their families, cultures and communities (Standard I: B.3). Learn more in our [*Practice Guideline: Diversity and Culture*](#).

Confidentiality

RECEs respect the [confidentiality of information](#) related to children and families and obey all laws pertaining to privacy and sharing of information. RECEs disclose such information only when required or allowed by law to do so or when the necessary consent has been obtained for the disclosure of the information (Standard VI: A).



Consent

Consent is defined as the act of giving permission or approval to do something. Professional relationships involve a respect for active, ongoing and informed consent. RECEs respect each child's uniqueness and dignity (Ethic A). They foster environments that affirm and promote consent by acknowledging, validating and asking children before they support them (e.g., with personal care needs), and by obtaining consent wherever it is needed with families (e.g., sharing of information) and with their colleagues (Standard VI: C.4).

Critical reflection

Developing and maintaining caring and responsive relationships involves ongoing critical reflection by RECEs. They engage in critical reflection and collaborative inquiry with colleagues ([Standard IV: C.1](#)) to ensure that in their relationships, the children's best interests are always prioritized.

Self-awareness

Professional relationships thrive when RECEs nurture their own well-being and have a sense of self, including an awareness of [beliefs, biases](#), assumptions, values, reactions and feelings. When educators are present in this way, it provides safety and security to children, families and colleagues, and allows them to respond appropriately and equitably to everyone in the learning environment.⁹ By cultivating self-awareness, practising self-compassion and prioritizing their relationships with themselves, RECEs are better able to be attuned and responsive to the holistic needs of children, support families and collaborate with colleagues (Standard 1: C.1, C.5 and C.6).

Balanced Professional Relationships



When RECEs practise according to the Code and Standards and uphold the key elements of professional relationships (on page 6), they are more likely to establish and maintain balanced professional relationships.

However, relationships are complex and sometimes professional relationships can veer towards either under-involvement or over-involvement by the RECE. For example, when one of the key elements is missing, such as appropriate boundaries and/or confidentiality, under- or over-involvement in the professional relationship may be more likely to occur.

Balanced relationships:

- meet the holistic (social, emotional, cognitive, communication, language and physical) needs of the child.
- involve appropriate levels of engagement with a child, family or colleague.
- are caring, supportive, responsive and attentive to the needs of the child and family.

Under-involvement in a professional relationship:

- is non-responsive and does not meet the needs of the child or family.
- is distanced, uncaring and uninvolved.

Over-involvement in a professional relationship:

- often prioritizes the needs of the RECE instead of those of the child or family.
- may include inappropriate engagement or involvement with a child, family or colleague.





The following charts demonstrate what balance, under-involvement and over-involvement in professional relationships can look like and highlights potential causes of imbalance.

Balanced professional relationships



Caring and responsive to children, families and colleagues/supervisees

In balanced professional relationships, an RECE:

- demonstrates accountability to children, families, colleagues and the profession through the use of their ethical decision-making and professional judgment.
- is aware of and reflects on their beliefs and biases to ensure an equitable level of care for children and families.
- understands the importance of setting and maintaining professional boundaries with everyone in the practice environment.
- recognizes families as the experts on their children and works in partnership with families, sharing knowledge and resources to support the holistic well-being and learning of children.
- understands the inherent imbalance of power between themselves and a child, family or colleague/supervisee and takes care to ensure that these individuals are protected from potential abuse of an RECE's position of power.
- does not use their professional role to meet their own personal needs outside of their professional relationships (e.g., social support, companionship, power).
- engages in ongoing critical reflection and learning.



Under-involvement in professional relationships



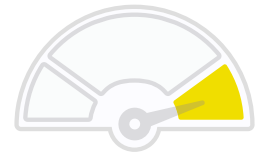
Risk of harm to children, families and colleagues/supervisees

Under-involvement may arise:

- from tension that could develop in relationships that were at one time over-involved or entangled causing the RECE to pull away from the situation and the people involved.
- when an RECE's unchecked beliefs and biases prevent them from providing the appropriate level of care and attentiveness to all children and families. For example, racism and discrimination can lead to under-involvement and disengagement.
- when an RECE lacks the skill or confidence to support a child or family (for example, with a disability or when conversations about race or sexuality surface).
- from burnout, external stressors and/or a lack of caring for self.
- from a lack of critical reflection, self-awareness, and/or professional judgment.



Over-involvement in professional relationships



Risk of harm to children, families and colleagues/supervisees

Over-involvement can stem from:

- an unmanaged dual relationship, such as an intimate or business relationship.
- a desire to fix a child, family, or colleague. This form of entanglement may at first appear to be in the best interest of the people involved, but often is a result of the RECE putting their own needs over the best interest of a child, family or colleague.
- unchecked beliefs and biases where the RECE shows preferential treatment to a child and family.
- unchecked beliefs and biases that lead to conduct such as correcting children based on factors such as their race, ability, gender, sexuality, religion, class, status and perceived power in the community.
- from a lack of critical reflection, self-awareness and/or professional judgment.

Restoring balance in professional relationships when either under- or over-involvement occurs can be achieved through critical reflection, ongoing learning, and the RECE's commitment to amending their practice.



Professional Love

The practice of early childhood education and care involves more than routine, transactional interactions. It is a caring, responsive, compassionate and complex practice, that involves both an intellectual and heart connection.¹⁰ RECEs establish authentic, secure and trusting relationships with children and families, grounded in deep care and a respect for professional boundaries.

Recent research has explored the connection between ECEs and children and highlights professional love as a key value in the ECE-child relationship. Focusing on the intentional relationships between educators and children, professional love refers to the appropriate and ethical ways educators express care, affection and emotional support, ensuring children's well-being while upholding professional responsibilities and boundaries.

“Love is essential for human psycho-social development, especially in the early years.”^{11(p2)} As an Indigenous value, love is also deeply rooted in the practice of working with children, alongside compassion and respect for each other and the land.¹²

For further exploration and reflection questions on professional love, here's a [Pause and Reflect](#).



Caring and responsive relationships as an act of self-care and leadership



For children to develop and feel an authentic sense of security and belonging, the RECEs who care for them also need caring and responsive relationships in their workplace, professional communities and with themselves. Children’s sense of security, mental health and well-being must be considered within the context of their environments and all their relationships. This includes the professional relationships among the RECEs who care for them. “Children are at the greatest risk when the people caring for them are experiencing persistent and severe adversities” and stressors.^{13(p30)}



Caring and relationship work is emotional and challenging. Educators need time away from their professional roles and responsibilities to rest and restore. Developing balanced professional relationships that value boundaries is an important act of leadership in an RECE’s practice. Taking care of oneself and being responsive to one’s own needs allows RECEs to better support those they care for and work with.

Visit the [College’s Wellness page](#) which is specifically designed for RECEs and highlights wellness and mental health resources that are available to all members.





An employer's role in an RECE's well-being

Employers also play a critical role in fostering balanced relationships within organizations. They support the health and wellness of RECEs by creating work environments that prioritize mental health and well-being.

Employers can do this by:

- recognizing that their own role, as well as the roles of the RECEs and staff, is emotionally demanding;
- modelling appropriate boundaries surrounding work and personal time and acknowledging the importance of separating the two; and
- reviewing policies and practices to ensure they support the development of professional relationships that value equity.

When employers demonstrate a commitment to the health and wellness of RECEs, they're actively engaging in acts of care and leadership which ultimately works to support all children and families in the program. Educators who value caring for themselves are better able to care for others.

RECEs are encouraged to discuss their needs for support with their employers. The [**Practice Guideline: Communication and Collaboration \(Section3\)**](#) provides guidance on communicating with colleagues, including supervisors.





Additional resources to support your learning

- [*Building Relationships at Work*](#)
- [*Pause and Reflect: Professional Love*](#)
- [*Practice Guideline: Communication and Collaboration*](#)
- [*Practice Guideline: Diversity and Culture*](#)
- [*Practice Guideline: Professional Boundaries*](#)
- [*Practice Guideline: Professionalism*](#)
- [*Practice Note: Beliefs and Biases*](#)
- [*Reflection Guide: Beliefs and Biases*](#)
- [*Standards in Practice Standard I: Caring and Responsive Relationships*](#)
- Video (3 mins): [*Snapshot: Standard I - Caring and Responsive Relationships*](#)



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⁵Caring About Care.

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