Practice Note

college of early childhood educators

Child Development

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

Being able to understand and support healthy child development and well-being is foundational to an RECE's professional practice and reflects their unique expertise. This responsibility is embedded in the profession's scope of practice described in the *Early Childhood Educators Act, 2007*, which states that an ECE's practice is "the planning and delivery of inclusive play-based learning and care programs for children in order to promote the well-being and holistic development of children."

RECEs understand that **strong, positive relationships contribute to healthy child development** and are necessary for children's well-being and learning. Building and maintaining caring and responsive relationships with children, families and colleagues is fundamental to the practice of RECEs (Standard I: A).

Child development and RECEs' responsibilities

To support children's development, RECEs develop positive, trusting, responsive relationships with them and their families. Ethic B says that "RECEs recognize and respect the uniqueness and diversity of families." Children develop in different ways within the contexts of diverse family structures, communities and cultures; therefore, RECEs need to understand that children and their families have unique experiences that derive from the historical, social, physical and political structures around them. Knowing this, RECEs learn about children's unique personalities, interests and abilities. They form partnerships with families — collaborating, communicating and working with families — to provide meaningful opportunities for them to engage in and contribute to the learning environment and their child's experiences.

Some core responsibilities related to child development are highlighted below.

RECEs:

- Are knowledgeable about 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.I).
- Understand that childhood is not one linear pathway. Children will not adhere to the same developmental timelines or develop in the same ways. **Child development is integrated across multiple domains and within a variety of contexts and environments** (Standard II: B.1).
- Stay current about relevant research related to how children learn and develop. They understand that **children are capable and enthusiastic learners with unique personalities, skills and interests** (Standard II: B.4).
- Foster collaborative partnerships with children's family members. 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).
- Support children in developing coping skills, regulating their behaviour and interacting positively with others. They recognize all **children's capacity to self-regulate and their right to be supported to develop these skills** (Standard I: C.4).
- Use technology and assistive **technological tools as appropriate to support children's learning and development** (Standard II: C.5).
- Provide **safe and appropriate supervision of children** based on age, development and environment (Standard III: C.5). They assess the program in order to ensure it is stimulating and that their expectations of children are realistic.
- Use appropriate and **effective communication methods and strategies to share information** with families regarding the development and learning of children. They are receptive listeners and offer encouragement and support by responding appropriately to the ideas, concerns and needs of children and families (Standard I: C.5; Standard II: C.7).

With these or other standards in mind, take a moment to reflect on how you and your colleagues support children's overall development in your practice setting. What practice areas do you feel most comfortable with? What areas do you want to learn more about?

Common child development domains in practice

RECEs understand the importance of play for children's development; in many ways, they are linked and happening simultaneously. Dr. Jean Clinton (2013) says that areas of child development are also "interconnected and developing together — emotions, language, thinking — rendering it ineffective to focus on one area without the others" (The Power of Positive Adult Child Relationships: Connection is the Key, p. 5).

How Does Learning Happen? (HDLH?) (2014) states that if educators *only* pay attention to the "traditional" child development domains — social, emotional, physical, cognitive, communication and language — it wouldn't capture the entire picture. HDLH? (2014) says "the creative, aesthetic, and spiritual dimensions of experience must also be considered," (p. 17) as well as the significance of developing a positive self-identity. This is explored further in the *Practice Guideline on Child Development* (2022).

For many working in the early learning and child care sector, child development brings to mind common developmental domains, such as social and emotional development; cognitive development; communication and language development; and physical development.

Social and emotional development

Social and emotional health and well-being may be one of the most important areas of child development. Having a sense of belonging offers children stability which can support all other areas of a child's life and learning. HDLH? (2014) says that "as children engage in various forms of social play and are supported to recognize the varied capabilities and characteristics of other children, they learn to get along with others; to negotiate, collaborate, and communicate; and to care for others" (p. 24).

To support children's social and emotional development, RECEs:

- Greet and welcome children, and ensure each child feels important when they come into the space;
- Get to know children: respond to their cues, interact with them, listen to their stories and ideas, and ask open-ended questions related to what they hear or sense from children's silence, movement or body language;
- Help children understand and articulate their emotions, build confidence and form a positive self-identity. Learn more about the *pedagogy of listening* in the *Practice Guideline on Pedagogical Practice (2020)*.

- Support the development of self-regulation to help children make and sustain friendships.
- Plan predictable transitions, routines and schedules that allow for flexibility to support a child and the group as a whole.
- Co-create environments that belong to everyone in the learning community.
- Promote the full participation of all children.
- Build and maintain responsive, authentic partnerships.
- Generate positive collaborative relationships with colleagues to support the social and emotional well-being of the learning community.

Cognitive development

Cognition is not solely about memorizing information or mastering certain milestones. While learning different concepts and grasping ideas is important, **the focus of cognitive development is grounded in the process of *learning* and the idea that children are competent critical thinkers** capable of solving problems on their own, with peers, with educators and by engaging with the environment.

To support children's cognitive development, RECEs:

- Generate discussions with and among children. Talk with them and ask them thought provoking, open-ended questions to promote comprehension, reasoning, prediction, critical thinking and decision-making skills.
- Challenge children to problem solve by encouraging them to use their own resources or come to solutions with their peers and educators.
- Encourage children to try new things and support them in taking healthy risks that deepen their sense of confidence.
- Listen and respond to children's cues, statements and inquiries. Validate children's feelings which, in turn, promotes feelings of well-being that contribute to cognitive flexibility.
- Support children's ability to engage in critical thinking throughout the day (e.g., transitions, outdoor play, during a learning activity, at rest or during meal time).
- Promote an understanding of sequences and patterns in creative ways that engage all children.

Communication and language development

Communication consists of many things including:

- **Verbal communication** which can include spoken word, questioning, songs and storytelling. It involves listening, asking questions and generating conversations and stories.
- **Non-verbal communication**: which consists of body language, movement, gestures, body and facial expressions, and silences.

To support cognitive development, RECEs:

- Respond to and observe children's body language, statements, questions and cues.
- Engage and generate conversations with individual and groups of children.
- Learn about children and families and what kind of communication is essential for them.
- Find out what language(s) children speak and what language(s) is used at home.
- Seek ways to incorporate children's languages and communication preferences into all aspects of the daily program.
- Demonstrate a commitment to address the unique rights and needs of Indigenous children and their families, which includes languages (Ethic A).
- Tell stories and sing regularly with children to support them in acquiring and comprehending language(s), vocabulary and how to form sentences.

Remember, **families and children communicate in different ways**; therefore, children may respond to or feel more comfortable using any number of differing cues. Keep the following in mind when you engage in communication with children and families:

- eye contact
- touch
- light and sound
- physical cues and body movements
- facial expressions

- Sign language
- words, stories or songs
- body proximity (sitting beside them, crouching down, standing over them)

Physical development

Physical development considers the body and how it grows and develops. This includes brain and muscle development, nutrition, movement and exercise.

To support children's physical development, RECEs:

- Understand the importance of children's brain development:
  - RECEs have a unique role in that they work directly with children during some of the most influential years of brain development. Dr. Jean Clinton has affectionately referred to RECEs as '*neuroplasticians*.'

    - They also engage in serve and return: an active process of responding to children's facial cues or expressions, coos, words and/or songs. It's viewed as a way of paying attention to what a child is communicating and responding with interest, care, love and touch. Here, the connection to communication and language and social emotional development is demonstrated, illustrating that separating domains can limit the view of the developing child.
- Support the development of children's growing bodies. This can be through activities such as:
    - planning and preparing nutritious snacks and meals;
    - ensuring children have adequate quiet and rest times;
    - promoting fine motor skills in activities and through self-help skills; and/or
    - encouraging gross motor skills to support coordination, confidence and movement.

Consider the ways that developmental domains can intersect. One area of development may blend into another or multiple areas. For example, snack or meal time is considered a time to promote children's physical development. Consider how snack or meal time can contribute to the following domains: language and communication, social and emotional and cognitive development.

Engage in conversations with colleagues about how you are currently supporting children's overall development in your practice setting. Think about the ways one activity can support a child's overall development. For example, story time:

Social and emotional: seeing and hearing about the lives of characters and relating to them; being and talking with friends; or laughing, smiling and building a sense of belonging through community.

Cognitive: exploring patterns or textures, critical thinking, problem solving, anticipation of storyline and decision making skills.

Communication and language: discussing the storyline, asking questions, waiting for cues and listening to the educator and their peers.

Physical: turning the pages; acting out the storyline or jumping in place like the character; using finger puppets; being in the space in a way that is comfortable for their body; having a bottle or snack; or falling asleep during story time.

What other areas of child development might storytelling promote?

To promote healthy child development and well-being, RECEs:

- hold all children in high regard and support their sense of dignity by treating them with integrity and respect;
- understand that children develop in different ways;
- know that children and families come from diverse social contexts, family structures and socio-economic circumstances, and are impacted by factors such as race, disability, ability, trauma, age and religion;
- create equitable environments that dismantle racism and discrimination, and promote inclusion, feelings of belonging and well-being; and
- stay informed about the ways that beliefs and biases, discrimination and racism powerfully — subtly or obviously — function in society and communities, including in early learning environments.

Continuous learning

To deepen their knowledge and enhance skills and practices in the area of supporting child development, RECEs engage in ongoing learning about the complexities of childhood and development. With varying degrees of experience in applying child development theories into practice, RECEs seek and give guidance to colleagues to embed new and evolving theories and practices to best support children and families. As well, **RECEs continually deepen their understanding of child development, both in theory and practice** because knowledge and experience play a large role in informing their professional judgment, ethical decisions, actions and behaviours.

Ongoing Critical Re lection

Ideas about child development are most often framed around western theories and practices which are not the only views to consider. RECEs regularly critically reflect on western theories of child development. They seek to grow in their understanding that children's development is not a linear universal theory applied in the same way for each child. Child development is flexible, and it will depend on the child and their social, cultural and familial context, their experiences, trauma, interests, personality, outlook and their family's hopes and ambitions for them.

With this understanding, RECEs observe, document and discuss children's interests, experiences and learning. During these reflections and discussions, RECEs also keep an open mind that considers social, cultural, historical and political contexts and structures that impact children and their families. RECEs co-construct knowledge and ideas with children, families and colleagues. They draw from their evolving professional knowledge of child development, learning theories and pedagogical and curriculum approaches to plan, implement, document and assess child-centred, inquiry and play-based learning experiences for children (Standard II: A). Read the Practice Guidelines on *Pedagogical Practice (2020)* and *Child Development (2022)* for more in-depth reflection and discussion.

RECEs know that trusting relationships that value and respect diversity promote child development and the co-creation of welcoming environments that strengthen well-being and children and family's senses of belonging. **Understanding the general pattern of child development guides RECEs to co-design environments and curriculum framed around individual and groups of children**, and what is important to families.

RECEs have a responsibility to guide children who express a range of capabilities, behaviours, emotions, ideas, experiences, fears and traumas. In a profession that is rooted in continuous professional learning, RECEs know it's important to stay informed about current information, research and resources that support their understanding of the developing child.

Additional Resources

For further opportunities to reflect on, review and discuss the following resources:

- *#StandardsinPractice series*
- *Practice Guideline on Communication and Collaboration*
- *Practice Guideline on Inclusion of Children with Disabilities*
- *Practice Guideline on Supporting Positive Interactions with Children*
- *Practice Note on Beliefs and Biases*
- *Practice Note on Play-Based Learning*
- *Reflection Guide on Beliefs and Biases*
- *The Power of Positive Adult Child Relationships: Connection is the Key*

College of Early Childhood Educators

Telephone: 416 961-8558 **Toll-free:** 1 888 961-8558

Email: practice@college-ece.ca
Website: college-ece.ca

Cette publication est également disponible en français sous le titre : *Note de pratique sur le développement de l'enfant*

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