



Saskatchewan  
Ministry of  
Education



# Play and Exploration



**EARLY LEARNING  
PROGRAM GUIDE**



April 2008

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education would like to extend a special  
thank you to Stephan, age four, for his ladybug drawing.

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Caroline Krentz  
Professor Emerita  
University of Regina

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*We are the meaning makers - every one of us ... the responsibility is clear: to interact with those in our care in such a way as to foster and enrich their meaning making.* (Wells, 1986, p. 222)



## INTRODUCTION

*The Early Learning Program Guide* is an important part of Saskatchewan's early childhood development initiatives. The *Guide* affirms the importance of high quality experiences for all Saskatchewan children during their preschool years – three to five years of age.

The *Guide* draws on knowledge gained from early childhood education research, examples from successful practice of early childhood educators and understandings passed on through community culture, values and beliefs.

Young children experience learning through play and exploration in a variety of settings including the home, child care, Prekindergarten, preschool and other early childhood programs. High quality programs engage children and their families in the planning and delivery of a healthy, safe, culturally sensitive and stimulating program that promotes children's abilities and interests. The intention is that all programs will reflect the vision, principles and quality elements described in the *Guide*; however, children, families, educators and community context will affect how a particular program looks and feels.

The aim of this guide is to promote high quality, age-appropriate, play-based learning experiences for three-, four- and five-year-old children in a variety of settings.



### ORGANIZATION OF THE EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM GUIDE

The *Early Learning Program Guide* has been organized around foundational elements of a high quality early learning program. The focus is on learning from contemporary literature and practices.

Part I describes the vision and principles around which the *Guide* has been developed.

Part II, Children as Competent Learners, explores how beliefs about children and their capabilities impact program design, interactions and, ultimately, children's learning.

Part III, Changing Role for Educators, reviews how seeing children as competent learners has caused educators to examine their practices and expand their roles.

Part IV, How Young Children Learn, revisits active, experiential learning and why it is vital to child development. The role of exploration in children's learning is examined, as is the importance of holistic learning.

Part V, Observation and Reflection – Critical Skills, describes how these powerful practices are foundational to the design of high quality programming.

Part VI, High Quality Programming – What Does it Look Like?, highlights three key components of program design – the environment, relationships and planning – and how these are impacted by the foundational elements described in Parts I to V.

The remaining portions of the document, Resource Sheets, Appendices and References, provide additional information.

Readers will also notice Reflection and Decision Making pages. These are provided to assist educators in reflecting and discussing the foundational elements and planning for implementation.

### INTO PRACTICE RESOURCE BOOKLETS

A series of additional booklets have been developed to assist early childhood programs implement the foundational elements described in the *Guide*. These *Into Practice* booklets will be available on the Ministry of Education's website, <http://www.learning.gov.sk.ca>, in the Early Learning and Child Care section.



## PART I: VISION AND PRINCIPLES

*Decisions are more easily made when educators have reflected upon and are clear about what it is they believe about teaching and learning, about children and their life in the program, about their own goals, and about what they hope the children will become. (Wassermann, 2000, p. 41)*



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### VISION

Early learning programs are holistic, responsive, and developmentally appropriate. They focus on the healthy development of the whole child – social, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual development. Children, family members and early childhood educators collaborate in enriching children’s learning and growth.

#### ***Children and Their Learning Experiences***

Children engage in open-ended exploration with increasing independence, acknowledge their expanding abilities, and communicate their understandings of the world with confidence and creativity.

#### ***Convention on the Rights of the Child***

*The Convention on the Rights of the Child (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1989) declares that children have a right to play and their education should aim for holistic growth and development.*

Children develop holistically, demonstrating a range of abilities. They grow socially, emotionally, physically, creatively, intellectually and spiritually through active participation in individual and group activities, selection of materials and sharing of ideas and interests.

#### ***Children and Their Relationships***

Children relate positively and responsibly with their peers, adults, families and community members. They acquire a sense of acceptance, self-worth, belonging, generosity and trust through the caring, consistent relationships that emerge in culturally sensitive learning contexts and communities.

#### ***Children and Their Environments***

Children experience healthy, inclusive and safe settings that enhance their learning and well-being. Children see themselves reflected in flexible environments that stimulate communication, invite questions, encourage investigation and promote exploration. Children sense that they and their families belong in the setting.

## PRINCIPLES OF EARLY LEARNING

Quality early learning programs incorporate the following principles into their daily practice:

### Children as Competent Learners

- appreciate that children are active learners, drawing on their experiences to construct their own understandings of the world
- accept that children are competent co-learners with educators and learn best when their ideas are valued, their physical needs are met and they feel psychologically secure
- acknowledge that children demonstrate their various ways of knowing, doing and learning through their multiple ways of communicating

### Holistic Development and Learning

- integrate the domains of socio-emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual development into learning experiences
- base practice in early childhood education on current knowledge and research about child development and learning
- recognize that individual children develop at different rates, as well as within different domains
- support children's development with opportunities to advance children's growth beyond their current level of knowledge, skills, interests, attitudes and abilities

### Strong Positive Relationships

- respect the dignity, worth and uniqueness of children in the context of family, culture and society
- partner with children, families and community in program planning

### Stimulating and Dynamic Environments

- facilitate and guide play, exploration and discovery as important processes in enhancing children's holistic development
- promote the holistic nature of children's learning in an environment that stimulates exploration, curiosity and interactions with others
- encourage children's independence, responsibility and participation in the learning environment, family and community

These principles reflect a holistic approach to children's development and learning. They provide a foundation, set the direction for the early learning program in subsequent sections and offer guidance for effective practices.

*"[Children's] bodies, minds, emotions and spirits come to us as a package all wrapped up in an ever-accumulating set of experiences, relationships and connections that shape learning. [Early childhood educators] must act with intention to make our beliefs about the value of children, childhood, family, community and the learning and teaching process visible in the environments we create in children's programs."*

(Carter & Curtis, 2003, p. 7)



## REFLECTION AND DECISION MAKING

### Reflection

How do I ...

respond to the vision?

currently demonstrate the four major principles in my program?

- children as competent learners
- holistic development and learning
- strong positive relationships
- stimulating and dynamic environments

### Action

What will I do ...

to include the vision and principles of early learning into my program?

### Evaluation

How will I know the vision and principles are evident in my program?

## PART II: CHILDREN AS COMPETENT LEARNERS

*[Educators] must work toward positive conceptualizations of all young children that lead to what is always possible – recognition of the current strengths and abilities of the child, and the opening of further opportunity for further growth and development to the child. (Jalongo, Fennimore & Stamp, 2004, p. 68)*



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## DISCOVERING LADYBUGS – AN EXAMPLE OF A CHILD’S LEARNING EXPERIENCE

When the children were playing outside, Ricky noticed a ladybug crawling in the grass. He called to his friend, Tessa:

“Hey, Tessa, a ladybug! That’s the sign on your locker and I gonna catch it. Hey, I got an idea — why don’t we find more ladybugs so we can keep them and feed them and everything?”



All of the children began to look for ladybugs in the play yard but they didn’t find any. Ricky had another idea! He pointed to an area outside the play yard. “I know! Let’s go over there in the grass, Teacher. We probly find lots and lots over there.”

Mike decided that they needed something to put the ladybugs into once they were caught. He remembered the bug containers in the classroom. “Hey, Teacher! Can we get those things to put the ladybugs in so that they don’t get away on us?”



The children searched for ladybugs. Ricky crouched down and spread the grass blades apart. He carefully picked up the ladybug. “I got one, I got one!” he shouted excitedly. He carefully placed the ladybug in the container.

The children gathered a few more ladybugs and carried them in the container into the classroom. They placed them in the terrarium so that they could observe them every day. “This is our ladybug garden, right, Teacher?” asked Ricky, looking for confirmation of his idea.



The next day Ricky gently gathered a few ladybugs from the “garden.” He placed them in a magnifying container to observe them. He used coloured markers to draw what he saw. As he drew, he described his picture:

“My ladybug gots six legs and black dots. It red; they all red. We find them flying around and under the grass. Now they live in our Classroom.”

See pages 19 and 40 for educator reflections on Ricky’s experience with ladybugs. Look for the ladybug symbol.





*Play and Exploration:* *Early Learning Program Guide* emphasizes that the educator's belief about children is a foundational and critical component of a high quality learning program. When educators view children as competent and capable, the learning program becomes a place of wonder, excitement and joy for both the child and the educator.

How adults value and treat children influences how children develop. Children flourish when they are respected by adults and are engaged in making choices about their play activities.

Quality early learning programs recognize children develop socially, emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually. When children have opportunities to grow holistically in well prepared environments, children build relationships with their peers, adults, families and communities.

The educator creates an environment that reflects children's strengths and interests, and which supports the child's holistic growth. When children are viewed as capable, competent and full of ideas, adults begin to observe and listen to the ideas children contribute, fostering a shared learning opportunity between adults and children.

## EVOLUTION OF EDUCATOR VIEWS OF CHILDREN

There are many different ways to view children's capabilities. Fraser (2006) describes three influences on how children are viewed. One perspective reflects our family values through the experiences of our own childhood. Another is generated from observing and interacting with children during various societal activities as we progress through life stages. Lastly, Fraser (2006) writes about the cultural view – the one that is “shaped by the values and beliefs about what childhood should be at the time and place in which we live.” (p. 20)

Views of children have evolved over many years but remain somewhat similar in that adults make most decisions about children's education. Much of the current information about Canadian programs for young children continues to depict children as dependent on adults for direction in the learning environment.

*“Policy and practice in Early Childhood Education leans strongly toward the image of the child as innocent, and in need of adult protection, as adults grapple with decisions involving the child's best interests.”* (Sorin, 2005, p. 4)

*“The cornerstone of our (Reggio Emilia) experience, based on practice, theory and research, is the image of the children as rich, strong and powerful. The emphasis is placed on seeing the children as unique subjects with rights rather than simply needs. They have potential, plasticity, the desire to grow, curiosity, the ability to be amazed, and the desire to relate to other people and to communicate”*

(Rinaldi, cited in Fraser, 2006, p. 20)

*Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* offers a new perspective on how educators are evolving in their view of children. Today we have more information than ever about children's many abilities in their early years of life. It is now understood that play has a more important role in children's development than most adults realized in the past. Viewing children as competent learners has a strong, positive influence on children's identities, growth and development.

### THE COMPETENT, CAPABLE CHILD

This view proposes that early childhood educators believe children are capable of manipulating materials, discovering their world and problem solving. Children contribute ideas to conversations that help the educator understand how the child is interpreting a concept. Children make choices about where they would like to play, who they would like to play with and what materials would engage them in play activity. Children engage in open-ended exploration with increasing independence, acknowledge their expanding abilities and communicate understandings of their world with confidence and creativity.

*"The early childhood curriculum builds on the child's own experiences, knowledge, skills, attitudes, needs, interests and views of the world within each particular setting. Children will have the opportunity to create and act on their own ideas, to develop knowledge and skills in areas that interest them, and to make an increasing number of their own decisions and judgments."*

(Te Whariki: Early Childhood Curriculum, New Zealand Ministry of Education, 1996)

The Vision and Principles described on pages 4 and 5 in the *Guide* expand upon the idea that focusing on children's strengths positively impacts their learning. Specifically, the Children as Competent Learners principle states that in quality programs, early childhood educators:

- appreciate that children are active learners, drawing on their experiences to construct their own understandings of the world
- accept that children are competent co-learners with educators and learn best when their ideas are valued, their physical needs are met and they feel psychologically secure
- acknowledge that children demonstrate their various ways of knowing, doing and learning through multiple ways of communicating

### SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S SELF-IDENTITY

High quality early childhood programs include caring educators who establish stimulating environments that support positive self-identities in children.

Children develop as confident learners when educators acknowledge the experiences and skills children bring to their play and learning activities. When educators build on children's accomplishments, this strengthens connections to learning and to the sense of belonging in the classroom.



As educators scaffold children's understandings through authentic questions about their play, offer ideas that extend their play and allow children to contribute ideas to their learning, children reciprocate by demonstrating their trust in their own ability to make decisions and to investigate new projects.

*Scaffolding: children can be supported in their learning by another more knowledgeable person (usually an adult) who helps the learners move to the next level through questions, hints, or directions.*

Building positive self-identity depends on adults who:

- acknowledge children's rights to high quality learning opportunities
- care about and respect children
- emphasize children's strengths and abilities
- recognize children's curiosity, questions and theories
- follow the children's lead into their projects or ideas
- involve children in decisions
- include all children in activities
- encourage positive relationships among all children
- observe and provide quality experiences and materials
- value the many ways that children communicate
- respect the importance of families, communities and cultural environments
- invite parents and families to participate in the program

## RESPONSIVE LEARNING PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN

When the adult embraces these understandings, children experience a high quality, responsive learning program, one that integrates important findings of early childhood research about holistic development and learning; for example, play research and brain development – with effective practices that are developmentally and culturally appropriate.

### QUALITY IN ACTION

High quality programs provide:

- environments where children can physically see themselves and others through windows and mirrors
- photographs of the children and their families featured throughout the environment
- descriptions of the children's speech, photographs of the children's actions and displays of children's work allowing children to reflect on past projects





## REFLECTION AND DECISION MAKING

### Reflection

How do I view children who attend my program?

### Action

What will I do to view children as capable and full of ideas?

How might I change the program environment to reflect capable children?

### Evaluation

How will I know children contribute ideas, make decisions and choices on a daily basis?

## PART III: THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE EDUCATOR

*When I first started teaching Prekindergarten in 2004, I thought my primary role was to get these kids ready for Kindergarten. I now feel it is my job to create an environment which will help children to learn through discovery and exploration. I must provide materials and experiences which help all children to learn and grow through creating and playing. It is my role to help children experience wonder and delight in their everyday experiences. The best part of that is that I get to experience it too!*  
(a Saskatchewan early childhood educator, 2007)



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## TALKING ABOUT ROLES: AN INTERVIEW WITH A SASKATCHEWAN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATOR

### How has your role changed in the past few years?

In my current practice, I am less directive and adult-centered than I was earlier in my career. I feel that I have come to trust my belief that children are competent learners who, along with their parents and families, have much to contribute to the program.

My role as advance planner has changed from developing all of the activities and themes to exchanging ideas, sharing my knowledge and negotiating projects with children and adults.

### What differences in your role have you experienced?

Instead of my coming up with all the ideas and “running” the whole show, many of our events are a collaboration with resource people in our community. I have become a supporter of children’s creative ideas, diverse backgrounds and experiences. Rather than the pre-determined daily craft, children are encouraged to choose how they will communicate their ideas and thoughts about their activities and explorations.

### What remains the same in your role?

Several areas are somewhat similar to my past role, but my ways of carrying these out continue to improve and grow. I continue to support holistic development and children’s language and literacy. I continue to use appropriate evaluation tools.

### What circumstances do you think caused the role change for you?

My professional development experiences, combining my reading and what I learn from children, led to many of the changes in my role. For example, listening, observing and documenting what children attend to, what they observe and what they question help me to recognize “good practice.” When children are not engaged with materials, I reflect on the situation and consider what might be a better way to do things.

### What feelings have you experienced around these changes?

At times I have felt excited, other times frustrated and even fearful. Most of the time, I feel excited and affirmed, especially when I observe children actively involved with materials and connecting with other children in creative and positive ways. When I witness the quality of children’s work, I am amazed and excited by the levels of learning that take place through their projects.

My frustration and fear occurred at times when I didn’t know how to proceed. Once I realized that I could invite my colleagues to collaborate with me, I began to relax. Just as children benefit from re-visiting an experience, I too gained from talking about my experiences and thoughts with my peers. There are many areas that I need to develop in my practice. Change does not happen overnight. I remind myself to take one step at a time.

Most adults who work with young children spent many of their early years in settings where adults took charge of directing most happenings in the classroom. Early childhood educators today are changing that approach to one that is sensitive to preschool children as learners, competent to participate in deciding what they will learn.

When educators view children as active participants, capable of collaborating in decision making in the learning context, children's voices become part of the discussion about the direction of learning. Children are invited to offer their suggestions on activities, materials and project ideas.

Together adults and children build a supportive learning space. Together they build on children's interests and educators' knowledge and resources. Through this type of collaboration, both adults and children experience satisfaction as they find a place for their ideas and strengths.

## EXPANDED ROLES

The following expanded roles are adapted from Fraser (2006) and describe the changes that educators are embracing in their professional practice.

### **Observer**

Observations, once used primarily for safety and developmental assessment, are now an integral part of a quality program. The educator watches and listens to children regularly. Observations are used to review processes, reflect on and analyze children's learning and as a foundation for program planning.

### **Documenter**

Many educators have experienced recording anecdotal notes and may have shared these descriptions with parents. Building on these practices, a growing number of educators are recording the learning processes, children's language and questions. Audio tapes, photos and art capture the learning processes and are publicly displayed. This documentation is shared with parents and children.

*"I have been challenged to change my way of thinking about children's learning, my way of interacting with children and how I co-construct knowledge in discussion with children."*

(a Saskatchewan early childhood educator, 2007)





*“Our duty as teachers is to listen to children, just as we ask them to listen to one another. Listening means giving value to others, being open to them and what they have to say. Listening legitimizes the other person’s point of view, thereby enriching both listener and speaker.  
p. 120 Rinaldi, C. Projected curriculum constructed through documentation.”*

(Rinaldi, 1998, p. 120)

### **Listener**

An increasing number of programs are encouraging educators to prioritize listening to children. Children contribute ideas through conversations and initiate actions that demonstrate their learning. When educators reflect on how children express themselves through their words and actions, educators become better equipped to extend children’s learning. In turn, this enhanced learning develops critical thinking and problem solving skills in children, creating a deeper understanding in the child and the educator. In addition, listening is a tool that provides an opportunity for the educator to model how to accommodate other people’s ideas within a learning community.

### **Researcher**

Educators often did not think of themselves as researchers. In this expanded role, the educator researches other methods, strategies or play experiences based on observation and discusses the ideas with children. The educator reflects on recorded observations to consider next steps in planning with the children. Participation includes ongoing professional learning. Program decisions are based on research not assumptions.

### **Creator of stimulating environment**



To create a stimulating learning environment, educators are moving away from the use of commercial materials, decorations and adult-directed themes. Educators consider children’s current questions and interests when modifying the materials and resources in the room. The modifications are made to support children’s investigations.

Aesthetics and natural beauty have become a strong focus in the environment. The environment reflects educator, family and community values. By offering multiple choices of activities, the environment stimulates ideas, learning and experiences.

### **Co-constructor of knowledge**

Many early childhood education experts are challenging the effectiveness of the practice of planning program content prior to meeting the children. This may involve transmitting knowledge to children through direct instruction or a worksheet task.

Educators are moving away from direct instruction as their primary practice to one which is more inclusive of children’s ideas. In this expanded role as a co-constructor of knowledge, the educator

becomes a partner in the learning process, learning alongside the children.

The program content is negotiated by educators and children. Educators share information or engage in discussions that elicit children's understandings, questions or ideas about a topic or issue. The educator participates in the activity by adding props and asking open-ended questions to extend the learning. The educator welcomes children's suggestions about materials to include in the activity.

### **Negotiator**

In the past, children did not enter into negotiation with adults.

In a quality early learning program, educators assist children in thinking and expanding their ideas and projects by questioning and offering resources. Educators discuss with children how they can explore the possibilities in a new way.

*"In taking a negotiated learning approach to curriculum, educators move beyond simply providing children with experiences."*

(Fraser, 2006, p. 162)

### **Supporter of children's participation in decision making**

Educators are reflecting on their role in supporting children's participation in planning and decision making rather than predominately guiding and controlling children's behaviour.

In this expanded role, educators respect children as competent learners who are able to participate in decisions that affect their learning opportunities. Children share in decisions about routines and schedules to accommodate their ideas and needs. Educators organize choices that reflect children's interests and assist children to find appropriate ways to become involved in projects. Children have opportunities to make choices about their play activities.

### **Facilitator of small group learning**

While still allowing time for interaction with an individual child, educators are enhancing small group learning time. Educators engage children in small group play investigations or support individual exploration of an idea or combine small group and additional children in a project of mutual interest. Educators assist individuals who are not participating in a small group to enter into the action. Large and small group gatherings are used to plan the day or the project.





### ***Supporter of social relationships***

Early childhood educators have always prioritized children's social development. Current literature emphasizes the educator's role in modeling appropriate communication and problem solving skills that encourage children's ability to form and maintain relationships. Children are encouraged to be sensitive to differing opinions and ideas.

### ***Partner with parents***

In quality early learning programs, educators honour the parents' role as children's first teachers and collaborate with them to provide consistent support and culturally sensitive learning opportunities. Educators have expanded communication from one-way discussions, such as parent-educator interviews, to authentic engagement where parents are invited into the program to participate as members of the learning community. This enables the children's feeling of security to increase as they observe trust developing between parents and educators.

### ***Supporter of diversity***

As more children from different cultural backgrounds and with varying abilities participate in early learning and child care programs, educators are highlighting this rich array of perspectives. Educators include all children in activities, stories, discussions and experiences that expose new ways of cooperating, new information about cultural understandings, practices or languages and additional ways of supporting each other. Children are encouraged to value diverse viewpoints, cultures and abilities. Educators ensure all children can participate to their full potential.

*Recently I have been reading about the Reggio Emilia approach to education which reflects what I believe about children, families, community, relationships and my role as an educator. This new information, along with my practice, has given me the gift of another language, another way to express who I am as an educator. Not only have I found delight and wonder in the hundred languages of children, but have been inspired to find them in others and myself.*

(a Saskatchewan early childhood educator, 2007)



## EDUCATOR REFLECTION: WHAT DOES THE LADYBUG EXPERIENCE MEAN TO ME? (PAGE 8)



### *Seeing children in new ways ...*

This episode reinforced the importance of seeing children as inquisitive adventurers both in the formal learning setting and beyond. I learned that children do not see a difference between learning and playing. They are learning all the time even though I as an adult might think that outdoor play is a “break” from educational activities and, in my case, teaching responsibilities in the classroom environment. The children reminded me of their curiosity, their creativity and their determination to observe the ladybugs closely.

Also, the ladybug experience helped me:

1. See children as sources of inspiration and knowledge
  - Educator as learner
  - Children sharing their knowledge
2. Recognize the power of peer ideas
  - Adults valuing children’s suggestions
  - Showing respect for other children
3. Understand the messages from children about their knowledge and abilities
  - Noting what the children say and do in their play and investigations
  - Reflecting on what was said and done
  - Deciding where to take the ideas through scaffolding and additional materials
4. Appreciate the leadership of a child in a group
  - Inclusive approach
  - Language of invitation
5. Reflect on my view of children
  - Seeing them as partners in learning
  - Appreciating their ideas, energy and exuberance
  - Changing my ways of interacting and participating with children

### RECLAIMING THE DELIGHT

As educators embrace their changing role there is an opportunity for greater professional pride and rediscovery of the excitement of working with young children. Curtis and Carter (2006) encourage educators to develop dispositions or outlooks that support their joy in teaching. Useful dispositions that support and increase educator passion include:

- delight in and nurture curiosity about children's development to focus on what the children are doing
- value of children's play to deepen understanding of children's levels of development and the themes that interest them
- expectation of continuous change and challenge to make frequent decisions in the learning context
- willingness to take risks and make mistakes that will encourage professional growth, and act as a model to children as they learn
- time for self-reflection on what is happening and take the opportunity to examine personal responses and the need for a learning attitude
- opportunities to collaborate with other educators for support and to discuss professional topics
- advocate of appropriate practices for young children and their educators to ensure that programs are responsive to everyone's needs



## REFLECTION AND DECISION MAKING



### Reflection

How do I ...

currently view my role as the educator?

reclaim my joy in children's exploration?

### Action

What will I do?

What additional roles will I embrace?

### Evaluation

How will I know that I have expanded my professional practices?



## PART IV: HOW YOUNG CHILDREN LEARN

*Young children's greatest strength in the acquisition of knowledge is their passion for play. (Vivian Paley, 1986b, p. 121)*



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### THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY

*Play is the most natural of childhood activities and one of the most frequently observed.* (Hughes, 2003, p. 21)

Play is essential to healthy development. Games with infants, including patty-cake and peek-a-boo, help to program the brain for language and social development as well as other areas of learning. Preschoolers benefit from and typically prefer to engage in social play interactions with their friends and families that enhance their language, social skills and problem solving.

Children's play has been documented throughout history by writers in literature and by artists in pictures. Play is evident across cultures and in games played by children.

Contemporary theories view play as a process that supports young children in making sense of their environment and in expanding their understanding of their world.

### Defining Play

The criteria that Hughes (2003) offers to define play are: freedom of choice, personal enjoyment and focus on the activity rather than on its outcome. These three criteria are foundational to the play process in connecting children's development with their learning.

Play is further described by the following characteristics:

- self-directed
- self-selected
- open-ended
- voluntary
- enjoyable
- flexible
- motivating
- individual or group



### Functions of Play

Research has demonstrated that play enables children to:

- make sense of their world
- expand social and cultural understandings
- express personal thoughts and feelings
- practise flexible and divergent thinking
- encounter and solve real problems
- learn to consider other people's perspectives



- negotiate play roles and plans
- develop self-control
- extend language and literacy skills
- enhance brain and motor development

(Bredekamp, 1987; Bredekamp & Rosegrant, 1992; Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2005; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997; McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Pellegrini, 1980; Pellegrini & Bohn, 2005; Pellegrini & Smith, 1993)

A high quality early learning environment supports children's learning through play. Adults contribute to the play by modeling oral language and emergent literacy as well as providing props and resources to enrich the play (Jones & Reynolds, 1992). Materials are carefully chosen to allow children to engage and explore, thereby enhancing well-being and development.

### Play and Brain Development

Brain research confirms the importance of play in children's development. Parents and educators are encouraged to interact with children, substitute play opportunities for passive activities such as television viewing, and provide simple play materials that stimulate investigation and learning. (McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Frost, Wortham & Reifel, 2005)

*“As children mature, their play tends to become more social in nature, and they begin to engage in more cognitively advanced forms of play, such as constructive play, make-believe, and games with rules.”*

(Johnson et al., 1999, p. 221)

### Levels of Social Play

Children's play ranges from physical play with objects such as baby rattles to more complex cognitive play in games with many rules such as cards or chess.

Many early childhood educators have studied children's play. Parten (1932) observed children's social behaviour during play. From her observations she developed a continuum showing levels of children's participation in social play, which include types of social participation:

Child's passive play behaviour:

- **uninvolved:** in which the child moves about but does not participate in any type of play
- **onlooker:** in which the child may watch or speak with players but is not involved in the play

Child's involvement in play:

- **solitary:** in which the child plays alone
- **parallel:** in which s/he plays beside or near other players but does not play with anyone

- **associative:** in which s/he plays and talks with other players but the purposes or forms of the play may not be the same
- **cooperative:** in which the play is shared and negotiated with sharing and turn-taking

### Considering Cognitive and Sociodramatic Play

Early childhood experts categorize play into two types: cognitive and sociodramatic. Cognitive play reflects children's ages, conceptual understandings and background knowledge. Sociodramatic play involves two or more children who express communication that exchanges information and ideas. By observing preschool children's play, educators can assess children's social and cognitive growth.

*"Knowledge of the stages of play helps educators provide appropriate environments that support children's development. It enables them to enjoy, encourage, and appreciate age-appropriate play behavior."*

(Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997, p. 60)

### Cognitive Play

Researchers describe several stages of cognitive play. Smilansky builds on Piaget's stages, defining characteristics of the four stages of cognitive play:

- **functional/practice play:** repetitive muscle movements such as running, banging, stacking
- **dramatic/pretend play:** use of imagination and role play
- **constructive play:** use of blocks or materials to make something
- **games with rules:** accepts predetermined rules to play games such as rummy or jacks

(Piaget, 1962; Smilansky, 1968; Pellegrini, 1982; Smilansky & Sheftaya, 1990)

### Socio-dramatic Play

Socio-dramatic play relates strongly to children's cognitive and social abilities. It offers rich opportunities for children to:

- develop abstract thinking
- refine their understandings about the world
- solve problems in a safe context
- have a sense of control over what they experience or are doing
- learn how to relate to their peers in a positive way

(Vygotsky, 1962; McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Smilansky & Sheftaya, 1990; Piaget, 1962; Saracho & Spodek, 2003a)

Socio-dramatic play occurs when two or more children develop a pretend play episode. It is most typical of three-, four-, and five-year-old children. In this type of play, children represent their growing understanding of the world through their body language, spontaneous oral language and vivid imaginations.

*"Imagination is to children what problem solving is to adults."*

(Weininger & Daniel, 1992)

Specifically, preschoolers' pretend play:

- encourages language and vocabulary growth
- increases memory abilities
- enhances reasoning and problem solving abilities, especially in situations when contradictory facts are considered
- fosters flexible and inventive thinking

(Pellegrini, 1984a; Pellegrini, 1984b; McCain, Mustard & Shanker, 2007; Isenberg & Jalongo, 1997; Peplar, 1986)

## EMBRACING INCLUSION AND DIVERSITY THROUGH PLAY

Early childhood settings serve all children. Children bring diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds as well as differing abilities to the learning environment. Each early learning program must demonstrate an understanding and responsiveness to children's wide range of strengths, cultures and linguistic capabilities. Play offers multiple opportunities for children to come together as learners in a stimulating and inclusive setting. In their play and interactions, children learn about and practise their roles and responsibilities as members of an early childhood learning community.

When educators offer appropriate support to children's play, they establish an environment that nurtures holistic learning. Adult roles and responsibilities are essential in encouraging children's confidence to learn through play, in maintaining an environment that invites a positive self-identity in play and in enhancing the opportunities to expand positive relationships among the players.

*"We teach our children about equality, freedom, and fairness, but every day they are witnesses to inequities and discrimination. Often their ideas about diversity reflect these inconsistencies and confusions."*

(Derman-Sparks & Ramsay, 2005, p. 126)

### QUALITY IN ACTION

Adults contribute to play by:

- modeling oral language and emergent literacy
- providing props and resources to enrich the play
- observing children's play to assess social and cognitive growth
- negotiating with children where the play will progress and what materials or props are needed for the next steps



# HOLISTIC EDUCATION IN THE EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM

## Children Develop as Whole Persons

Children's passion for learning, their interactions with others and their life experiences affect their total being. All areas of each child's development change or transform (Miller, 1988) in relation to their new learning, their relationships and their activities.

Although adults tend to separate overall development into distinct areas – socio-emotional, physical, spiritual and intellectual – children function as whole persons whose development is affected constantly, by what happens to them, with them and around them.

All areas of a child's growth are interwoven in a child's life and develop simultaneously. Progress in one developmental area affects progress in others. Similarly, when something changes in any one of the areas, it has an impact on all the other developmental areas.

## Young Children's Holistic Learning

During the preschool years, young children greatly expand their knowledge, understandings and abilities. They actively explore and discover their world through experiences using their senses of touch, sight, smell, hearing and taste. It is important that the adults in children's lives understand and facilitate holistic learning.

## Pattern of Holistic Development

A general pattern of childhood development exists. However, the rate of development varies from child to child and is influenced by the home and community in which the child grows up and the goals and expectations set for them.

This guide assumes that early childhood educators have an understanding of the developmental changes that typically occur in children during the preschool years. It is beyond the scope of the document to outline in detail, the development of three-, four- and five-year-old children. For helpful sources about typical aspects of young children's development see Appendix C.

## Areas of Holistic Development

The following features key components of holistic development including characteristics of how children demonstrate each area. Although the developmental areas are shown separately, children



grow, learn and change through the interactions of all areas, relationships and experiences.

### ***Social-emotional Development***

Social-emotional development involves the emerging social skills, emotional resilience and personal self-confidence important in well-being and social involvement.

- Self-concept, self-image and self-confidence
- Self-control and self-regulation
- Interaction with others
- Social problem solving

### ***Physical Development***

Physical activity promotes overall development and stimulates neural connections. It is a foundational aspect of growth and well-being in children.

- Large muscle growth, balance and climbing
- Fine motor and perceptual skills
- Personal health and safety

### ***Intellectual Development***

Intellectual development concerns the emerging powers of knowing, reasoning and understanding.

- Imagination – “as if” behaviour; fantasy – “what if” thinking; begin to understand the difference between fantasy and reality
- Creativity and invention
- Understanding quantity and space
- Understanding the physical and natural environment and appreciating the natural world and their role in preserving the environment
- Conceptual thinking

### ***Spiritual Development***

Spiritual growth involves more than meets the eye, more than material objects and more than the obvious. It creates wonder that initiates a response.

- Children are naturally curious about their world
- Appreciate the natural world and observe beauty in what they see, hear and do in their surroundings





### Language and Literacy Development

Children construct emergent language and literacy skills as they develop in all areas. Language is basic to learning in all cultures and communities. A successful early learning program provides a language-rich interactive environment. It is through this environment that adults provide interesting and meaningful opportunities that support children in developing skills in the areas of viewing, representing, listening, speaking and emergent reading and writing.

The following processes contribute to language and literacy development:



**Viewing** – an active process of comprehending and responding to visual text including real objects, visual and multimedia representations, and performances. It enables children to use visual elements to construct meaning in what they are viewing.

**Representing** – the process of presenting ideas, thoughts and feelings using visual, dramatic and other media. Representing enables children to communicate information, ideas and experiences through drawing, dramatization, models and other mediums.

**Listening and speaking** – children communicate their thoughts feelings, experiences, information and opinions, and learn to understand themselves and others. Oral language development occurs in all areas of development. See Resource Sheet A: Genuine Conversations for suggestions when planning conversations.

**Emergent reading and writing** – help children begin to understand symbolic representations found in print. Young children begin to demonstrate knowledge of print, book-handling skills and reading-like behaviours. They begin to understand that their ideas can be communicated through symbols, letter-like shapes, letters and words found in writing. The planned environment invites children to notice and read symbols and to begin to express themselves in symbolic representations and written language.

These areas are interrelated and interdependent. Growth in one area reinforces and promotes growth in the other areas. Each of the processes of viewing, representing, listening, speaking, emergent reading and writing contribute to language and literacy development.

Social play promotes the areas of viewing, representing, listening, speaking, and emergent reading and writing. Play enables children to build the skills and strategies associated with each of the areas.

## QUALITY IN ACTION

To encourage viewing, representing, listening, speaking and emergent reading and writing:

- designate a “studio” area for creating and displaying children’s works of art and sculptures/constructions
- display pictures and posters of creations by established and community artists
- allow children to carry books from the “library” area to a writing space or to a related play area
- place books strategically around the classroom in attractive baskets or near a related toy or project
- offer appealing tools (e.g., new pens, sticky notes, clip boards) in various locations around the classroom; for example, in the dramatic play space or outdoors
- introduce use of maps, globes, diagrams, charts whenever possible to expand children’s experiences with different means of representing their world
- encourage children to communicate with their peers and with their parents by establishing a “postal system” in the classroom
- post picture and symbol notices for children at their height around the room





### Additional Languages

If the language used in the program is different from the home language of families, educators must be sensitive and supportive.

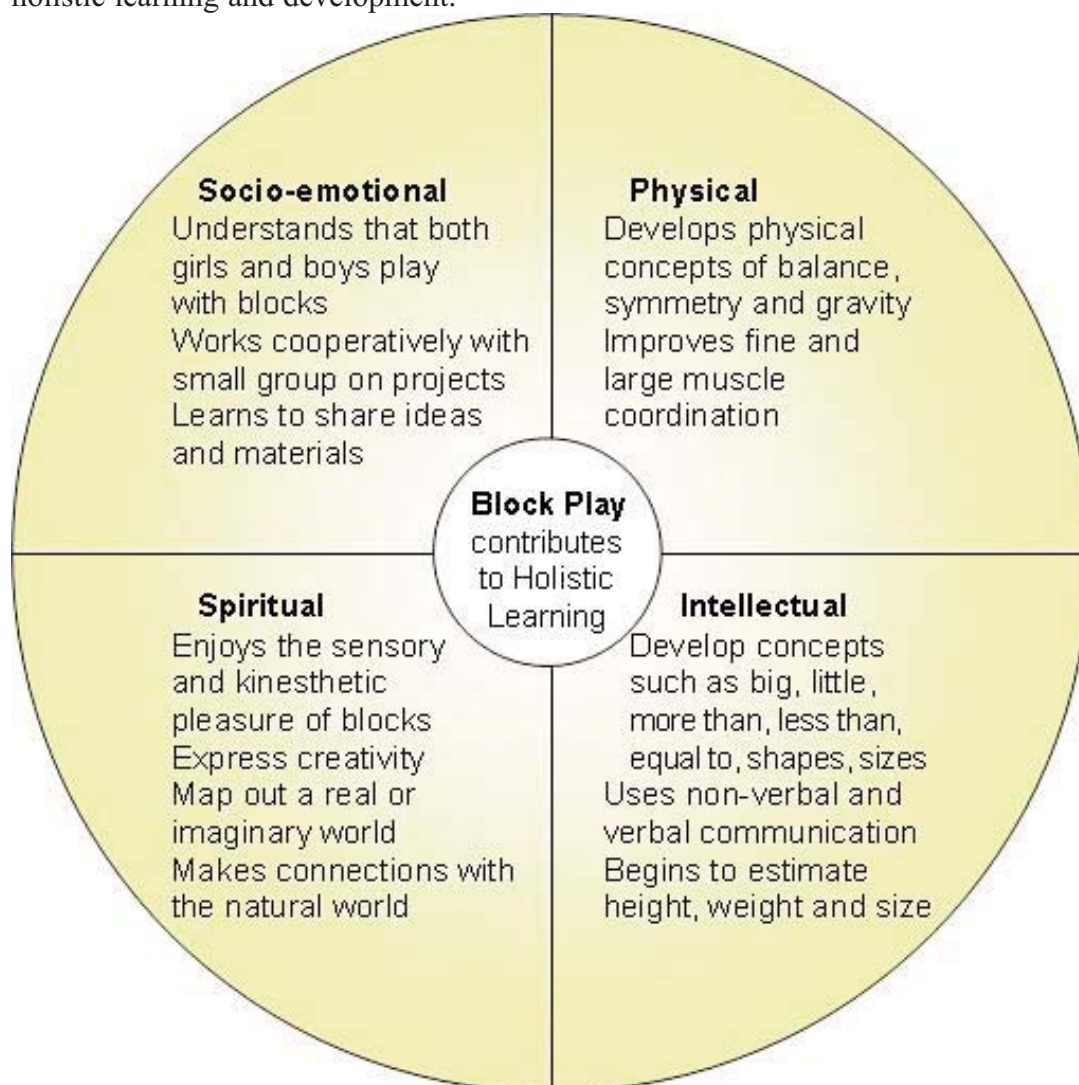
Ways to support additional language learning and cultural sensitivity:

- encourage children to speak about their language and culture
- add cultural and print materials in areas where children can explore and incorporate them into their play
- encourage parents to continue teaching their child to speak the home language
- affirm the values of the home culture
- schedule one-on-one conversations with the additional language learners
- arrange small group projects that include the additional language learner with sensitive peers
- encourage inclusion of additional language learners in dramatic play episodes
- invite families to visit the setting regularly
- offer additional language learners (and peers) opportunities to represent their ideas through dance, visual art and music, as well as words



## EXAMPLE OF HOLISTIC LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The following figure illustrates how an activity such as block play can demonstrate holistic learning and development.



The adult's role is to be mindful of all areas of development as they support children in their play.

Example of Enhancing Learning in Block Play	
<b>Language and Literacy:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>add books that provide images of various buildings and bridges</li> <li>add pencil and paper for children to represent their structural creations</li> <li>add props to increase language such as people, transportation (boats, cars, trucks)</li> </ul>	<b>Mathematical Literacy:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>add a variety of objects – blocks, corks, tubing</li> <li>add balance scales, blocks with numbers, measuring tape</li> </ul>

Page 59 contains master Resource Sheet B for educators to represent their own learning centres.



## REFLECTION AND DECISION MAKING

### Reflection

How do children in my program have the opportunity to experience ...

- socio-emotional development?
- physical development?
- intellectual development?
- spiritual development?

### Action

What might I add to support ...

holistic learning in my program?

### Evaluation

How will I know ...

if my program demonstrates holistic learning?

## **PART V: OBSERVATION AND REFLECTION – CRITICAL SKILLS**

*Educators who ‘look beyond the surface’ of children’s play, witness children’s knowledge, feelings and abilities. This close observation helps to ‘make children’s thinking visible’ to the adults around them. (Roskos & Christie, 2001)*



<b>HOW DO EDUCATORS GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT CHILDREN?</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>REFLECTIONS ON OBSERVATIONS</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>EDUCATOR REFLECTION: MY OBSERVATIONS OF THE CHILDREN IN THE LADYBUG EXPERIENCE</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>USING OBSERVATIONS AS A PLANNING TOOL</b>	<b>41</b>
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The process of learning from children and acting upon what is learned is a form of informal assessment that most educators use daily in their practice. Many educators have developed ways of recording the information they gather in their observations. The information becomes part of the children's learning process as the educator uses it to encourage more exploration of the children's ideas and interests. The information lays a foundation for understanding what children are learning and what might be added to the environment to support further investigation.

The document *Assessment and Evaluation in Prekindergarten: A Planning Guide for School Divisions and Their Partners* (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005, p. 1) contains some "specific advice regarding learning outcomes" in Prekindergarten programs. The appendices in that document offer some practical examples of what and how to observe children in the learning environment. This document is available at <http://www.learning.gov.sk.ca> in the Early Learning and Child Care section.

## HOW DO EDUCATORS GATHER INFORMATION ABOUT CHILDREN?

Taking time to notice what children are saying, planning and doing requires some organized way of observing and recording learning processes and information. Many educators have developed a system that helps them to take note of what is happening around them. The information invites the adult to reflect on what is observed and how to plan next steps in the children's learning processes. Common ways to gather information include:

- anecdotal records or anecdotal vignettes
- checklists
- learning stories
- videotape recordings
- photographs
- portfolios
- documentation posters, panels and books

The table on the following pages provides more detailed information on each method.

*"Documentation is an indispensable tool for educators in constructing positive experiences for children and in facilitating professional growth and communication for adults"*

(Gandini & Goldhaber, 2001, p. 124)



## QUALITY IN ACTION

### Gathering Information About Children

#### ***Anecdotal Vignettes:***

- are brief descriptions of a child's actions or behaviours at a specific time
- can be written while they are observed or shortly after the event
- provide information about children's play processes, abilities and areas of development
- include information such as time, date, setting and basic activity
- record actions and language as accurately as possible
- use sticky notes or index cards

#### ***Checklists:***

- focus on different topics or areas of development such as educator reflection lists, observation of play, language usage, social-emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual domains
- observe presence or absence of specific behaviours or actions
- are easy to use when carefully designed with program goal statements in mind

#### ***Portfolios:***

- are a purposeful collection of a child's work to show the child's progress and achievements
- collect children's work over at least three time periods in a year
- invite children to help make the selections
- share their growth and progress with parents
- provide samples of drawings, varied representations of projects and any written work, dated and accompanied by comments that tell stories of activities
- include photos of children working together on projects or on individual activities along with children's quotes and word descriptions
- offer a record of learning valued by children and families
- examples of contents: child's self portraits over the year, child's attempts at writing name, child selected samples

#### ***Video Taping:***

- capture authentic actions and behaviours
- shareable with children and parents
- represent actual learning processes
- invite discussions and reflection
- provide ideas for follow-up in projects
- can be used over time to compare growth in developmental areas, such as language development

## QUALITY IN ACTION

### Gathering Information About Children continued

#### ***Photographs:***

- document a small portion of a process or event
- can be accompanied by written descriptions of the process being recorded
- can be easily shared with children, parents, the community
- can become part of a larger documentation of children's learning projects
- are a more permanent and visible record of learning

#### ***Learning Stories:***

- tell a story about a child's learning processes or a group of children learning together
- may be told from the perspective of the child, the educator or the parent
- document what a child has been working on alongside others or when interacting with peers
- describe three elements in the observation: interacting with materials, developing understanding, and creating representations of understanding
- detail what children "can do"
- may be brief written snapshots or lengthy records over a longer time period
- may include educator interpretations and personal comments
- present an authentic view of children learning in a specific context
- function as part of educator reflection and program planning
- can be easily shared with children, parents and others
- are appropriate in early childhood settings where storytelling serves as an important way of communicating

#### ***Documentation Posters, Panels and Books:***

- record traces of children's learning processes in a visible way
- capture the important moments in learning
- combine photos, records of children's conversations, questions and ideas
- show sequence of processes in developing and completing a project
- communicate children's learning to the learners themselves as well as adults and other children
- encourage revisiting the project and processes



## REFLECTIONS ON OBSERVATIONS

While watching and interacting with children in their play, educators pay close attention to how children make known their ideas, interests and theories. These revelations challenge educators to assess:

- what children are thinking about
- how children interpret and communicate what they are doing
- what children are learning through the play process
- who children are interacting with and how they interact
- where the children might take their interest over the next few days

Educators reflect on the above assessments and make decisions about:

- how they will support children's interests and questions
- what resources or props might be added to the environment to enhance the learning and to deepen the children's experiences
- where the play might lead and how the educator might scaffold the children's learning





### EDUCATOR REFLECTION: MY OBSERVATIONS OF THE CHILDREN IN THE LADYBUG EXPERIENCE (PAGE 8)

Being with the children as they play outside is always a pleasant experience for me. Usually, I am watching each child to ensure that everyone is engaged in a play activity and is safe. Often children are running around, riding trikes or digging in the sand. Sometimes they become involved in play that relates to their natural surroundings. Imagine how exciting it was for me as well as the other children when Ricky observed a ladybug in the grass!

Ricky quickly demonstrated that he was able to match the ladybug with the symbol on the locker of his friend Tessa. He remembered the name of the insect from our discussions about each child's symbol, from stories in books and finding pictures of ladybugs and later singing rhyming chants about ladybugs.

Ricky's enthusiasm quickly spread to the other children who joined in the search for ladybugs. He offered an invitation to others to participate in the fun and also suggested where to find ladybugs more easily. These actions told me that his suggestion was intended as an inclusive activity and that he understood that insects need food and protection. Mike joined in by offering to get the insect containers from the Classroom.

The children decided to bring the ladybugs into the classroom where they could observe them more closely. Placing the ladybugs in the terrarium reflected the children's understanding that the insects would be more comfortable and safe in a more natural environment. Ricky continued to demonstrate the connections he was making between the outside world and the inside classroom environment when he named the terrarium "our ladybug garden." His choice of words also showed his growing facility in language.

His interest continued the next day when he took time to observe the ladybugs up close in the magnifying container. In the explanation of the ladybug picture he drew, he indicated his understanding of one-to-one correspondence and number, colours and habits as well as the habitat of ladybugs. He was able to narrate/tell the story of his ladybug adventure which gave me clear evidence of his literacy development.

The account of the ladybug experience gave me a clear image of how children's learning crosses all developmental domains.

- social-emotional: understandings of inclusion
- physical: control in crouching and gently searching through the grass
- intellectual learning: decision making, language and vocabulary, matching and number sense
- spiritual: sensitivity in attending to the insects' needs

These holistic perspectives provide just a few examples of the developmental areas enhanced during the ladybug experience.



## USING OBSERVATIONS AS A PLANNING TOOL

Good planning is a way for educators to think about what they know about children and how children learn and make progress. Planning encourages educators, using observations to consider the best means to sustain an effective learning environment. They discuss their ideas with other adults, including parents, as well as with the children. Working and talking together strengthens the learning context for both children and adults. Ideas are shared, changed and enhanced over time as the conversations and actions unfold. Planning for learning is key to providing and sustaining a genuine learning environment for children.

All educators practise some type of planning. Some have had many opportunities to plan while others are less experienced in using a planning process. The particular setting, the number and age of children in the program, the length of time that the children spend in the learning program and the number of educators and their beliefs about children will affect the planning.

When educators plan possible activities using their observations, they should be:

- attentive to and aware of children's interest and ideas
- capable of observing and interpreting children's gestures and speech
- responsive to children's feedback
- thoughtful in their responses to children
- sensitive in their interventions with individual children
- reflective in doing self-evaluations
- becoming more aware of their own values and needs

One Saskatchewan educator explained it this way:

*"My role as advance planner has changed from developing all of the activities and themes to one of exchanging ideas, sharing my knowledge and negotiating projects with children and adults. I call this interaction intergenerational learning. Listening to children's conversations and ideas has led to some interesting discussions and learning."*





## REFLECTION AND DECISION MAKING

### Reflection

How do I ...

share the observations with others?

### Action

What will I do ...

to continue or begin to collect information about children?

### Evaluation

How will I ...

share the gathered information with children and their families?

## PART VI: HIGH QUALITY PROGRAMMING – WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

*Children express themselves through many different art materials, and through spoken and written language when they are involved in rich and meaningful experiences close to the natural world. (Lella Gandini as cited in Cadwell, 1997, p. ix)*



<b>CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING</b>	<b>44</b>
<b>CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>PROGRAM PLANNING AND SCHEDULING</b>	<b>51</b>
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# CREATING THE ENVIRONMENT FOR LEARNING

*We now know that the environment is a valuable teacher if it is amiable, comfortable, pleasing, organized, clean, inviting and engaging. This is true of all space, whether big or small, open or furnished, public or private. This is true of floor space, ceiling space and wall space. (Rinaldi, 1998, p. 116)*



Environments have the power to shape the learning that takes place.

In a high quality program, educators understand the importance of preparing children's surroundings to support all aspects of their development and growth. The environment communicates how the adults perceive children as learners.

When educators ensure that the setting reflects what children can do and what children can be, the environment sends positive messages to everyone. The setting can tell children that it is a place where they are valued as people capable of exploring materials and learning with the educator, other adults and each other.

## Children and the Environment

Children are very aware of their environments from an early age.

The *Guide's* vision, outlined on page 4, describes what children experience in a high quality learning environment:

Children experience healthy, inclusive and safe settings which enhance their learning and well-being. Children see themselves reflected in environments that stimulate communication, questions, investigation and exploration. Children sense that they and their families belong in the setting.

Environments affect children's physical responses, social and emotional growth, intellectual development, and their spiritual and aesthetic responses to their surroundings. The environment also influences the adults who participate.

In responsive environments where adults welcome children as co-learners, children are invited to make decisions, decide on limits and make choices, all of which are essential building blocks of knowledge. Relationships and learning are strongly related in the young child's life.

### QUALITY IN ACTION

When arranging the early learning space and choosing equipment, educators should consider:

- the needs, interests and expectations of the children and adults
- features of the room such as doors, windows, sink, electrical outlets
- the placement of furniture and equipment
- spaces for individual activity, small group projects and whole group gatherings
- storage for child and adult belongings
- organized areas that complement learner projects and comfort
- ease of movement
- visual and aesthetic appeal
- relationships and interactions



To reflect on your early learning environment, refer to *Resource Sheet D: Inventory of a Responsive Environment* on page 62.

### **Assessing the Learning Environment**

Creating a climate for learning, building relationships and growing together challenges early childhood educators to reflect on their values, to explore the elements that comprise friendly, comfortable environments and to discover what is possible.

In exploring the impact of the environment on children's learning and their development, educators consider a complex range of elements that sustain positive learning attitudes and developmental outcomes. These elements are as follows:

### ***Promoting Positive Social-emotional Development***

Quality early learning programs include cozy, soft nooks away from noisy activities, places where children can choose to rest or to talk with friends. This thoughtful type of planning is centered in the belief that children need choices in the environment that match their desire for action or their need for comfort or quiet.

Knowledgeable educators regularly examine their space designs to ensure that the setting enables children to enjoy adult respect, choices in their learning setting and caring interactions. A sense of belonging in the environment is essential to the quality of children's learning and ability to relate to others.

### ***Encouraging Optimum Physical Development***

Environments, both indoors and outdoors, can encourage children's physical activities and growth.

Environments that accommodate children's physical development provide opportunities for them to represent their physical power through adventures in pretend play and risk taking. Carefully planned environments can overcome safety concerns and support children in "trying out" their developing powers. Outdoor space with open areas for tricycles, digging, running and jumping allow children to use and expand their emerging strengths.



Children also begin to combine perception with motor skills:

- **body awareness:** understanding body parts, what parts can do, how to make the body more efficient



- **spatial awareness:** understanding how much space a body occupies and how to use the body in space
- **directional awareness:** understanding the location and direction of the body and objects in space
- **temporal awareness:** understanding the relation between movement and time in sequences related to rhythms or patterns

### ***Creating an Aesthetic Setting that Nourishes Children's Spiritual Development***

Carefully planned environments can provoke children's appreciation of the beauty of their natural world, foster their curiosity about their surroundings and ignite their imaginations. Spaces filled with natural and soft light, pleasing colours, interesting shadows, bright reflections or familiar musical sounds can give pleasure to those who live and work there.

Children enter learning situations with a sense of wonder and imagination. The environment can draw children into examining treasures from home, collections of natural materials from the outdoors or intriguing specimens displayed near a magnifying glass.



### ***Stimulating Intellectual/Cognitive and Language/Literacy Development***

Both unusual and familiar materials in the environment encourage children's explorations. Through their investigations, children begin to understand their world and how it works. They begin to develop their personal theories about motion, colour, light, sound, living things, tools and machines. Their conversations demonstrate how they are thinking and how they negotiate their ideas with their peers.

Observant educators encourage these exchanges by offering new props or questions to stimulate more investigation. The adults extend these emerging ideas by responding with new words or phrases that support the children's attempts to explain what is happening. Children's intellectual/cognitive development, as well as language and mathematical literacy, are stimulated in these investigations.

Children's interests offer clues to the types of materials and props that educators add to small group projects. Parents can also be invited to assist. They may supply resources or information that support children's search for knowledge and understanding.

### QUALITY IN ACTION

#### *Indoor Environments*

- offer sensory materials rich in colour, texture, shape, aroma (consider any allergies)
- involve children in meaningful work such as clean up time, carrying materials
- encourage self-help actions such as pouring water or washing containers
- allow children to use real tools (brushes, hammers, etc.) for their projects
- provide materials that are accessible and open-ended for fine motor development

#### *Outdoor Environments*

- prepare obstacle courses that change frequently
- ensure that children have time outdoors daily
- organize space for running, jumping and climbing, pushing and pulling equipment
- add props such as large rocks, wood and water to encourage socio-dramatic play
- use landscape play areas with grass, plants and trees for aesthetic reasons, games and exploration
- provide space for wheeled equipment
- find pathways that invite exploration and imagination
- investigate natural sand and water areas, flower and vegetable beds for scientific investigations



## CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR RELATIONSHIPS

*The building of strong relationships in every aspect of an early childhood program is the key in providing quality care and education for young children. (Fraser, 2006, p. 97)*



Children's relationships with other children, their families and the wider community influence their development. A secure connection with the educators as well as the learning environment heightens children's confidence to participate in learning opportunities. When children feel safe and comfortable in an environment, they engage more fully in activities and interactions.

### Parent and Family Participation

Educators have always recognized the importance of parent and family involvement in early childhood programs. In recent years, there has been a significant shift toward developing more respectful, committed relationships between families and educators in early learning settings.

Parent and educator collaboration facilitates children's movement from the home to the early learning setting. Continuity between the home and the learning environment is essential for the child's smooth transition into a new setting with adults who value and respect the family's role in the child's life. Key to this change is educators' openness and willingness to honour the racial, cultural, ethnic, religious and socioeconomic diversity of families.



Expanding the notion of involvement to one of parental engagement (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005) reflects the value of mutual trust that develops between parents and educators who share their knowledge and power with each other. These long-term relationships benefit all members of the learning community, especially the children.

This sense of “we” is also important for the adults who work together on a regular basis. Children observe the ways adults interact with each other. Collegial professional relationships among the staff affect the development of warm, caring relationships with parents and children.

### Children and Their Relationships with Adults

How adults value and treat children influences how children develop. Children are able to flourish when they are respected by adults and are engaged in making choices about their play activities. High quality early childhood programs include caring educators who establish stimulating environments that support positive self-identities in children.

Children thrive in learning environments where educators respect their ideas, encourage their play investigations and invite their participation in planning what happens in the setting. The sense of belonging that emerges from the value educators place on each child strengthens the child as a person who has worth, who treats others with respect and who has the confidence to investigate and understand the surrounding world.

### Children and their Relationships with Peers

Children learn how to establish relationships through their play with their classroom friends. Linking play and relationships occurs naturally in socio-dramatic play episodes. Working together in their pretend play, children learn to use their language and social skills as they cooperate, negotiate, persist in tasks and collaborate to sustain their play.





## PROGRAM PLANNING AND SCHEDULING

Educators' beliefs and views about children, their approach to learning, the appropriate learning environment and the nature of relationships in a setting will influence the kind of program they offer to the children. Effective educators will reflect on their beliefs when making decisions that affect children and their families. It is essential to ensure that the program is appropriate for and reflective of the children and families it serves.



The planning process begins with practitioners considering questions that help them think about their perspectives on several issues.

- What image do I have of children and their abilities?
- What is the role of play in children's learning?
- What are appropriate materials and equipment that stimulate children's development and curiosity?
- How will the indoor and outdoor spaces be used to encourage exploration and learning?
- How will parents and community members be involved?
- What are the best ways to support children's imaginations and creativity?

Responses to these questions offer insight into educator values and beliefs about children's learning, their relationships and the importance of the environment. Program planning, roles of adults and the quality of the learning environment are all affected by the responses.

### Planning Processes

Planning programs for preschoolers can take various forms. The following are examples of two different planning processes:

#### 1. Preplanning by Educators

Educators prepare the program well in advance of program delivery. They set down the major program goals, detail the objectives, describe all related activities, prepare the space, assemble the materials and carry out the plan with the group of preschoolers. Often, this approach uses traditional themes such as holidays to organize the various areas of learning to include in the program. Children participate in the activities as they are presented by the educators. Usually the entire group is involved in a range of activities that centre on the particular theme. The theme may last between one and two weeks.



*Emergent program:  
The planning of activities  
and projects that emerge  
in the daily life of the  
children and adults  
learning together in an  
educational environment.  
Often the focus of the  
emergent curriculum  
begins spontaneously  
with a child or group of  
children and is followed  
up by the educator who  
plans and frames the  
content, the environment  
and the accompanying  
resources.*

### 2. Collaborative Planning by Children and Educators

Educators develop major program goals based on their knowledge, professional interactions and previous experiences with preschool children. The goals help to frame a responsive emergent program (see Appendix A) as it evolves in a particular setting. These educators observe and listen carefully to children as they engage in conversations, investigations and explorations of their environment.

The themes or projects for small groups are developed by children working with the educators (Katz, 1998). The educators prepare the environment with appropriate space, materials and suggestions for the children. Children are motivated to add their suggestions as the project grows and changes (Seitz, 2006). Projects vary in length from several weeks to several months. Using project topics familiar to children invites them to:

- contribute what they know
- suggest questions to ask
- consider ways to investigate
- take leadership in the project
- assume specific responsibilities
- collect and examine information and artifacts
- take on roles as natural scientists or anthropologists

(Katz, 1998)

Collaboration results in a more culturally responsive learning environment for everyone. Children are invited to be initiators, planners, decision makers as well as learners. Educators themselves are supported in their professional growth and parents become allies in the teaching/learning context.

Comparison of Educator Preplanning and Collaborative Planning		
Planning Focus	Educator Preplanning	Collaborative Planning
<b>Program Purpose</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• prepare for school success</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop positive attitudes and dispositions about learning to learn</li> </ul>
<b>Program Emphases</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• academic content</li> <li>• knowledge presented in parts</li> <li>• focus on teaching specific skills</li> <li>• product oriented</li> <li>• cognitive and social development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• play, exploration, investigation, creation, questioning</li> <li>• focus on understanding and making connections in learning</li> <li>• process oriented</li> <li>• holistic development</li> </ul>
<b>Goals and Objectives</b>	Educators prepare: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• long range goals</li> <li>• short-term objectives</li> <li>• daily teaching to objectives</li> </ul>	Educators, children and parents negotiate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• broad goal statements</li> <li>• preferred ways of achieving the goals</li> <li>• ongoing review of goals and children's learning</li> </ul>
<b>Program Content</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• preplanned content usually for entire session</li> <li>• group lessons related to objectives</li> <li>• free play in typical learning centres with little adult involvement</li> <li>• formal evaluation of learning through checklists and observation of skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• small group discussions about ideas and interests</li> <li>• choice among varied and changing experiential centres</li> <li>• observe children's play and project work to make suggestions, expand resources and interests</li> <li>• document children's learning process</li> <li>• display documentation for review by children, their peers and other adults</li> </ul>
<b>Environment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use of commercial material to decorate the space</li> <li>• centres are changed infrequently</li> <li>• materials and equipment support the goals and specific objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• use of natural light and materials</li> <li>• displays of children's creations</li> <li>• emphasis on aesthetic appeal</li> <li>• centres change with topic and interest</li> <li>• educators create inviting areas for exploration</li> </ul>
<b>Role of Educators</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• provide direction to learners</li> <li>• teach skills and new information</li> <li>• manage behaviour</li> <li>• communicate with parents about children's learning and growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• facilitate, interact, suggest, negotiate and communicate with children</li> <li>• help sustain interest in projects with new materials, questions and suggestions</li> <li>• assist children to link new information with past learning</li> <li>• invite parents to visit, participate and review children's successes</li> </ul>
<b>Learning Opportunities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• large group teaching</li> <li>• interest centres for individual play</li> <li>• encourage choices, decision making, social interaction, turn-taking</li> <li>• small group sessions for teaching skills to specific children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• environment invites individual and small group interactions and investigations</li> <li>• experiential centres challenge children to use their senses and learning processes to explore</li> <li>• encourage decision making, choices, problem solving, communication, creativity, imagination</li> </ul>

### Scheduling

Adults are well-tuned to the demands of time and schedules in their daily lives. Children, however, tend to focus on what interests them in their immediate environment and lives. Consequently they follow a more instinctive agenda as they live each day.

By three and four years of age, children have some sense of the passage of time over the day. Their home lives have been influenced by their parents' schedules and children become aware that the clock dictates what happens on a daily basis. How then, do educators balance scheduling demands while honouring the children's need for opportunities to linger over a favourite book or to explore how a machine really works, to just sit quietly and notice what is happening around them and to listen to familiar sounds?

Schedules can take many forms. They may contain only those points in the day that cannot be altered; for example, gym time or home time, or they may be centred on meal and snack times. Important considerations for developing a schedule are creating balance and keeping transitions and interruptions in children's activities to a minimum.

In a quality early learning program the schedule should reflect a balance of:

- active and quiet times
- child-initiated and educator-framed activities
- indoor/outdoor activities
- family and community engagement
- age and developmental level considerations

Flexibility and empathy towards children are always of primary importance in scheduling decisions.



## Educator Reflection

At our child care centre, we found that we were always glancing at the clock to make sure that we were “on time.” The clock seemed to be directing the program. Often children were not ready to stop their play when the clock signaled for change to a different activity. After some discussions with staff, parents and children, we decided to remove the clock. Some parents were apprehensive: Would their children “get time” to eat snacks and lunch? How would the day unfold? What time would they come for their children? Don’t children have to learn about time?

In reality, each of these issues was easily solved. Snack and lunch times became more flexible: food was available around the usual times so that children and adults were able to eat when appropriate for them. We found that the preschoolers became more independent about cleaning up their toys or setting projects aside when they decided it was time to eat. Groupings of children varied daily, but usually children gathered with friends or adults to chat while eating. Overall there were fewer interruptions in children’s activities. Everyone agreed that the natural rhythms seemed better suited to both children and adults.



## REFLECTION AND DECISION MAKING

### Reflection

How do I ...

- provide a rich environment and set the stage for play, both indoors and outdoors?
- develop relationships with children and their families?
- allow for flexibility in planning and scheduling?

### Action

What will I do?

- to make changes/additions/deletions to the indoor and outdoor environment?
- to enhance the relationships with children and families?
- to provide flexibility and empathy towards the children?

### Evaluation

How will I know it worked?



## RESOURCE SHEETS

*Young children learn best through active participation and experience. When helped, allowed, and encouraged to follow an interest and construct a plan to learn more, children are empowered and become intrinsically motivated. They fully engage in the experience when it is their own. (Seitz, 2006)*



<b>A. GENUINE CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>B. REFLECTING ON HOLISTIC LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>C. EXPERIENTIAL CENTRES</b>	<b>60</b>
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### **A: GENUINE CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN**

Genuine conversations aim to involve all participants in an exchange of information and ideas that engage both children and adults.

Conversations with children change the educator's role from a "telling" role to that of "exchanger of knowledge and ideas" with the children. Conversations reveal and stimulate children's thinking, and provoke participants to imagine new possibilities in their work and to cooperate in realizing their plans.

#### ***Initiating Genuine Conversations***

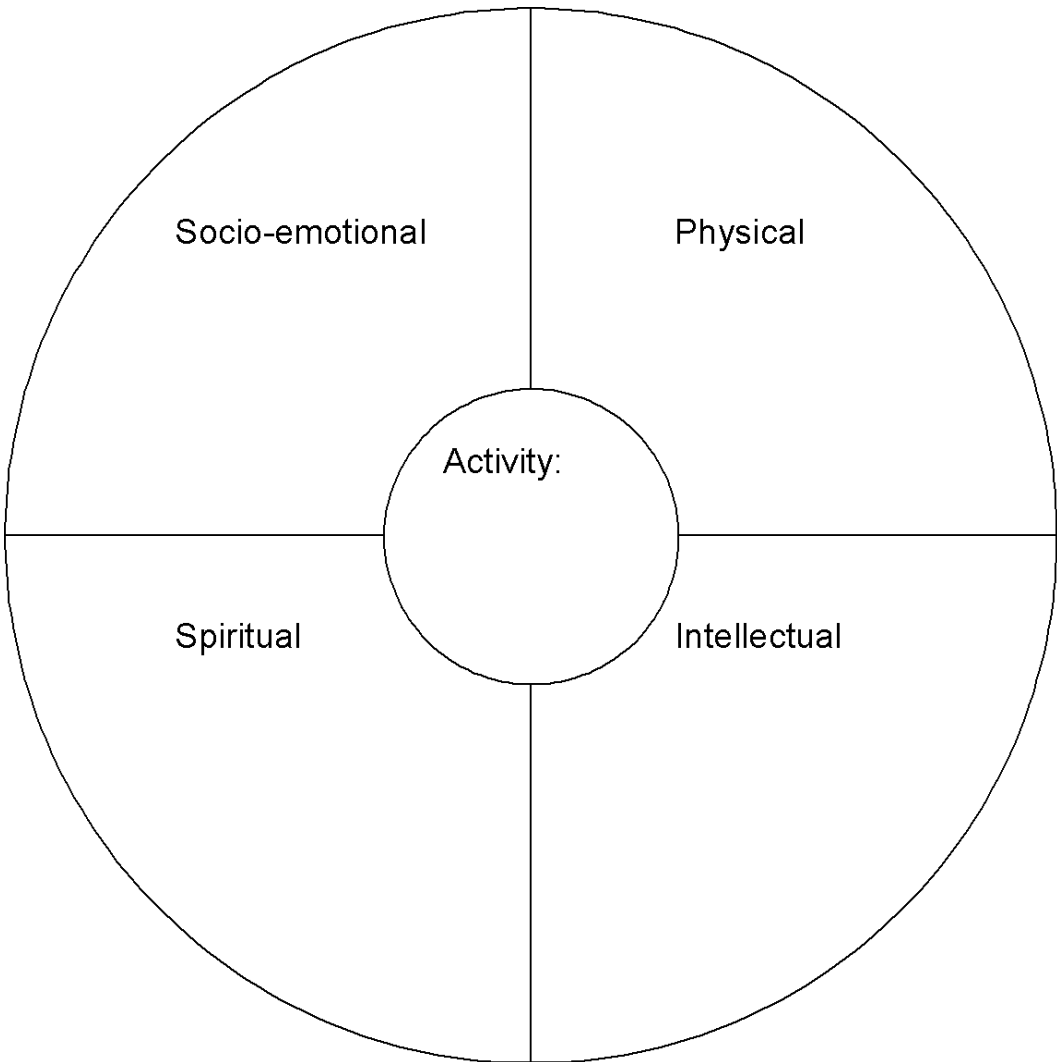
Planning is essential before initiating a conversation with a group of young children. The following are some beginning steps experienced educators suggest:

1. Think about the topic that you will talk about with the children.
2. Brainstorm some questions you might raise with the group to stimulate and challenge them to wonder about and offer ideas or responses. Avoid questions to which you already have answers.
3. Plan to use some tools (photos, notes, audio/video tape) to help you capture children's ideas.
4. Arrange a quiet spot for the conversation and another adult to be with children who are not involved.
5. Bring your excitement and genuine interest to the conversation.
6. Let children know that you are interested in their ideas and will record these ideas as reminders of the conversation.
7. Anticipate questions that might be used as prompts but let the conversation flow naturally.
8. Encourage children to stay on the topic if they stray too far. Allow children to take the lead in the conversation as they share their differing views and ideas.
9. Act as the memory for the children by summarizing in writing what they say in the conversation.
10. Review the summary notes and incorporate them later into a documentation panel showing the learning processes.

(adapted from Cadwell & Fyfe, 2004)

## B: REFLECTING ON HOLISTIC LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

How can a play activity represent holistic learning and development?



The educators' role is to be mindful of all areas of development as they support children in their play and plan for learning.

Enhancing Learning in Play	

See page 33 for an example of how block play supports holistic learning and development.

### C: EXPERIENTIAL CENTRES

A variety of materials and props in the environment encourage children's investigations. Experiential centres where intriguing props, tools, equipment or materials are attractively displayed invite children to discover, imagine, investigate, question, think about and test their ideas.

Most early learning settings include centres of some type. The content and the application of these centres vary considerably. In a play-based program, many of the centres will invite children to play with materials, people and equipment, either indoors or outdoors.

Some centres, such as the construction centre, remain in the environment over a long period, with new props added as children's ideas change. Other centres, such as a Space Centre, are introduced as children's questions and new topics evolve.



Educators observe, listen and respond with props, materials and suggestions that extend children's growing understanding of how their world works. Over time, the centres change to reflect the children's ideas and growing knowledge of the world around them.

Centres will vary depending on the context and interests of the children. The following are some examples of experiential centres, inspired by Curtis & Carter (2003) and the schools of Reggio Emilia.

#### Motion

- Water table equipment such as hoses, plastic tubing, containers of various sizes, beaters, whisks, funnels
- Cardboard or plastic tubes combined with wooden boards and marbles, cars and balls
- Equipment such as inexpensive plastic troughs, pulleys and rope for constructing inclines
- Collections of pulleys and ropes mounted on frames
- Hand-held fans that cause air to move
- Working clocks with wheels and hands
- Outdoor structures with ropes, wheels and pulleys
- Swings, hammocks



### Light, Colour, Shadows

- See-through, gauzy fabrics
- Light table with varied shapes and textures, transparent materials, colours
- Mirrors of varying sizes placed at child's level for viewing or holding to reflect light
- Overhead projector with shapes, coloured pens to use with transparencies
- Overhead projector behind white bed sheet for shadow play with cut-out shapes and props
- Prisms
- Glass beads
- Paints of various colours and eye droppers, ice cube trays



### Sound

- Adult-sized musical instruments including various instruments from different cultural traditions
- Radios, videos, tape/CD players with recordings
- Adult and child designed musical instruments for outdoor play (e.g., hanging pipes, bells, chimes)
- Drums
- Shakers
- Invitations to an older group of student musicians to play for the children
- Attendance at musical presentations
- Playing musical games such as “Ring Around the Rosy”

### Natural and Living Things

- Fish and underwater plants in tank
- Terrarium with plants and creatures
- Potted plants through the seasons
- Soil and seeds for planting
- Visits by family pets
- Collections of shells, stones, cones
- Fresh flowers and leaves or branches
- Visits to gardens, pet stores, farms
- Wood of different shapes, grains, sizes



### Machines and Tools

- Magnifying glasses
- Small machines (calculators, radios, keyboards, telephones)
- Hammers/nails, screwdrivers/screws/soft wood, etc.
- Safety glasses and work gloves
- Microscopes
- Maps and globes
- Magnets
- Scales
- Wheels



### **D: INVENTORY OF A RESPONSIVE ENVIRONMENT**

Educators review the prepared environment regularly to ensure that it is responsive to all of the users. Consider the questions below as you reflect on your learning environment.

1. What type of feeling does the environment communicate to children, parents, visitors and educators?
2. How much maintenance is necessary to maintain the aesthetic appeal and the invitation to explore the environment?
3. Is the space arrangement conducive to easy movement and connection with other learners?
4. What natural materials, such as plants, rocks, sand, are evident in the space?
5. Is there a comfortable area for resting, reading and talking with others?
6. Where can family members gather or sit comfortably?
7. Are there centres for exploring new books, tools or materials?
8. Where are the materials to use for representing ideas and learning?
9. Are there places to engage in pretend play?
10. Are materials and objects accessible to everyone?

## **E: REFLECTION AND DECISION MAKING TEMPLATE**



### **Reflection**

How do I ...?

### **Action**

What will I do?

### **Evaluation**

How will I know it worked?

## APPENDICES

*Children often spend time reviewing their work in the documentations. Other children stop to notice the projects that their friends undertook. It seems to me that we have worked out a way of 'being,' of playing and working, of laughing and crying, of learning and teaching, of living together. (Saskatchewan Early Childhood Educator, 2007)*



<b>APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY OF TERMS</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>APPENDIX B: COMPARISON OF SELECTED EARLY PROGRAM APPROACHES</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>APPENDIX C: KEY RECOMMENDED RESOURCES</b>	<b>72</b>

### GLOSSARY OF TERMS

The terms listed below are defined as they are intended to be understood in reading and using the *Early Learning Program Guide*.

**Adults:** educators, parents, extended family members such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, caregivers, classroom visitors and community members.

**Anti-bias curriculum:** considering diversity as a regular aspect of the everyday curriculum in which educators foster children's positive attitudes toward the acceptance and celebration of differences.

*“An active /activist approach to challenging prejudices, stereotyping bias, and the ‘isms.’ In a society in which institutional structures create and maintain sexism, racism, handicapism, it is not sufficient to be nonbiased, nor is it sufficient to be an observer. It is necessary for each individual to actively intervene, to challenge and counter the personal and institutional behaviors that perpetuate oppression.”*  
(Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989, p. 3)

**Cognitive development:** the action of knowing, perceiving, conceiving.

**Creative:** inventive, imaginative behaviour that is supported by positive socio-emotional development.

**Culture:** an individual's traditions, history, values and language that contribute to their identity.

**Curriculum:** the whole array of experiences, planned and unplanned, that takes place in a young child's learning environment.

*“Curriculum is the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster learning and development.”* (Ministry of Education, New Zealand, Te Whāriki, Early Childhood Curriculum, 1996, p. 99)

**Development:** a term used to describe the multidimensional process of how a child/adult acquires the following skills, developed over a lifetime: social, emotional, intellectual, spiritual, speech and language, and physical, including fine and gross motor skills.

**Dispositions:** ways of acting or “habits of mind” that endure or last over time.

**Diversity:** a range of differences and variations in languages, cultures, abilities, religions, lifestyles and ways of being.

*“Preschoolers have already embarked on their lifelong task of figuring out ‘who I am’ and ‘who you are.’ They are aware of and curious about differences and similarities among people, ask questions, organize the data they gather, and construct theories*

*about diversity congruent with their general cognitive stages of development, as well as with their lived experiences.” (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2005, p. 125)*

**Documentation:** a process in which an educator collects (written notes, audio or video tape, artifacts) children’s ideas, words, creations and learning, to encourage the development of and reflection about meaningful experiences.

**Emergent curriculum:** the planning of activities and projects that emerge in the daily life of the children and adults learning together in an educational environment. Often the focus of the emergent curriculum begins spontaneously with a child or group of children and is followed up by the educator who plans and frames the content, the environment and the accompanying resources.

*“Emergent curriculum is sensible but not predictable. It requires of its practitioners trust in the power of play-trust in spontaneous choice making among many possibilities.” (Jones & Nimmo, 1995, p. 1)*

**Educators:** child care providers, early childhood educators, Prekindergarten teachers, preschool teachers, nursery school teachers and other adults who live and learn with young children in an educational setting.

**Emotional development:** increasing awareness of self and well-being through growth in confidence, self-control and positive relationships. Often discussed in relation to social development.

**Environment:** an educational setting in which children play, explore and learn.

*“In order to act as an educator for the child, the environment has to be flexible: it must undergo frequent modification by the children and the teachers in order to remain up-to-date and responsive to their needs to be protagonists in constructing their knowledge.” (Gandini, 1998, p. 177)*

**Holistic education:** is based on the view that each person finds self-identity, meaning and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world and to spiritual values such as compassion. In other words, the individual changes, learns and develops as a whole person, affected by a broad range of influences which in turn, are affected by each other.

**Intellectual development:** the process of developing the powers/abilities of knowing, reasoning and understanding.

**Learning stories:** the recording of a child or children’s active learning in a way that makes learning visible to others. The record of the learning process includes responses to questions such as: What learning is taking place in this situation? What does this situation reveal about the child(ren)’s thinking processes? Ideas? Interests? How might this information help the educator support next steps in the learning process? (Carr, 2001)



**Mathematical literacy:** a broad term that encompasses a wide variety of experiences that engage children in exploring mathematical concepts and strategies such as 3-dimensional objects, patterns, shapes, measuring, comparing, predicting, estimating, counting and problem solving.

**Negotiated learning:** a consultation process that involves adults and children in planning and supporting a project over time. While children may initiate an activity through their interest in a topic or question, educators consult with the children to make decisions about the direction, the resources and the activities that follow.

*“In taking a negotiated learning approach to curriculum, teachers move beyond simply providing children with experiences. They probe further, either by asking questions or by engaging the child in discussion to discover why children are absorbed in exploring a material, or they try to figure out what children are thinking as they touch, taste, examine or explore the texture of interesting objects.”* (Fraser, 2006, p. 162)

**Physical development:** the process of ongoing physical growth and maturation including fine and gross motor skills.

**Play:** while play is difficult to define, there is some agreement about certain characteristics or factors that identify play. These include activities that are: beyond the here and now, motivated by personal internal motivations, oriented toward process rather than products, free choices and generation of positive feelings in the player(s).

**Play script:** the playing out of a real or fantasy experience involving one or more children who develop the ideas through negotiating the actions.

*“A script is a play theme based in the child's real or fantasy experiences. It is the dramatic portrayal of a sequence of events, with predictable variations. Children playing together keep it somewhat unpredictable by adding new ideas and dialogue as they negotiate the emerging script with each other.”* (Jones & Reynolds, 1992, p. 9-10)

**Preschooler:** a young child between the ages of three and five.

**Project:** an in-depth study of a topic, question or object that may be initiated by a child, by a group of children or by adults in consultation with children.

*“It may consist of exploring a topic or theme such as ‘going to the hospital,’ ‘building a house,’ or ‘the bus that brings us to school’ ... Preschoolers might spend two or three weeks on a hospital project.”* (Katz & Chard, 1989, p. 2)

**Responsive learning environments:** situations in which the participants, both children and adults, are open, sensitive to and supportive of the feelings, ideas and needs of others in the settings.

**Scaffolding:** a teaching strategy that originates from Lev Vygotsky who said that children learn through social interactions (“sociocultural” theory). This theory states that children can

be supported in their learning by another more knowledgeable person (usually an adult) who helps the learner move to the next level through questions, hints or directions.

*“Teachers are encouraged to scaffold children’s activities ... Often, children are faced with problems that they can solve on their own with only a little assistance from an adult. This is the situation – within what Vygotsky called the zone of proximal development – in which most learning and development can occur.”* (Frost et al., 2005, p. 240)

**Self-concept:** the understanding of themselves that young children develop as they become aware that they are individuals with their own characteristics and are separate from other people.

**Self-esteem:** the understanding that preschoolers develop of their own worth and abilities.

**Self-identity:** refers to the view that children develop of themselves as individuals, which evolves over time.

*“A major accomplishment between the ages of three and six is the development of self-concept. Young children develop a firm awareness that they are separate from others and have individual characteristics ... Preschoolers begin the task of making judgments about their own worth and competencies. They tend to overestimate their mastery of new skills and underestimate how hard new tasks are. They are rapidly acquiring new skills and translating these accomplishments into positive or negative feelings about themselves.”* (Frost et al., 2005, p. 135)

**Social development:** the growth of skills that build on children’s emotional strengths in learning to communicate with and relate positively to other children and adults in their daily lives. Often described as socio-emotional development.

**Spiritual development:** the process of connecting with and living in the natural world while becoming aware of personal values and beliefs, gaining self-knowledge and reflecting on life’s fundamental questions.

# COMPARISON OF SELECTED EARLY PROGRAM APPROACHES

Program Approach	Description	Implications for Practice
<p><b>Reggio Emilia:</b></p> <p>Italian early education approach developed by Loris Malaguzzi</p> <p>Program:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Content emerges from children's interests</li> <li>Educators provide the space, time, resources and their suggestions</li> </ul> <p>Interest in the approach is growing internationally</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educators and children negotiate curriculum that builds on interests of children.</li> <li>Expect participation of parents and community.</li> <li>Small groups of children and adults collaborate on projects. Educators consider possible project directions, the necessary materials and involvement of parents and/or community. Learning is integrated during the developing project.</li> <li>Educators record children's ideas and words to prepare accurate representations and displays of children's learning. Encourage the "100 hundred languages" of children as ways of communicating.</li> <li>Incorporate multiple intelligences and the graphic arts.</li> <li>Recognize that both educators and children are co-learners in the process.</li> <li>Interpret teacher research as an integral part of the teaching/learning process.</li> <li>Group work encourages cognitive development, linguistic and language growth, problem solving, negotiation, critique, hypothesizing, cooperation.</li> <li>Environment gets special attention as an essential component of the learning process – environment as the "third" teacher.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adults and children decide on projects together.</li> <li>Lists of ideas and materials are prepared to help guide the project. These may change during the project development.</li> <li>Children initiate ideas and teachers help to frame the project through suggestions and supplying materials and equipment.</li> <li>Educators add their ideas to the discussions.</li> <li>Educators record the children's discussions, ideas, questions and solutions.</li> <li>Educators respond to learner needs and use the recorded information to prepare a documentation poster or display of the children's learning during the project.</li> <li>Documentation is displayed publicly for children to read and review, to share with parents and other adults.</li> <li>Learning processes and outcomes are clearly evident in the documentation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Theme-based:</b></p> <p>Two approaches to program content include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educator selects and directs traditional themes such as "holidays"</li> </ul> <p>Used in many North American early childhood programs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Educator often selects themes with traditional topics supported by commercial materials.</li> <li>Theme plans are developed and presented by educator.</li> <li>Children follow the adult direction as the theme unfolds over time.</li> <li>Traditional topics may integrate all areas of learning.</li> <li>Activities often result in preplanned products displayed following completion of the theme.</li> <li>Learning is usually focused on skills and predetermined, specific outcomes.</li> <li>Themes emerge from the environment, events, children or adults, culture or shared interests.</li> <li>Negotiated themes accommodate group and individual interests, culture, gender and learning approaches.</li> <li>Educators and children explore themes/topics in multiple ways using a variety of resources and materials.</li> <li>Emphasizes process and varied modes of representation by children as they communicate connections across their learning.</li> <li>Educators provide materials and support, extend ideas, encourage deep thinking, document the learning processes.</li> <li>Documentations include children's representations, ideas, suggestions, language and planning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Products of theme are displayed.</li> <li>Focus may be on outcomes and products rather than the learning process.</li> <li>Usually dependent on educator to initiate and direct with limited child/parent input.</li> <li>Often involves the use of a web or idea map of the theme and related ideas/areas during planning stage.</li> <li>Variations are widely used in preschool programs.</li> <li>Evolves into a negotiated project with children, educators and parents/other adults working as partners in planning, developing and supporting the activities.</li> <li>Involves webbing/idea mapping of related ideas/areas, discussions with children and parents/other adults as the plans emerge and change.</li> <li>Documentation includes planning processes, representations of learning processes that promote conversations, relationships, review and future possibilities.</li> <li>Links to future initiatives that deepen learning.</li> </ul>

Program Approach	Description	Implications for Practice
<p><b>High Scope:</b></p> <p>Developed in Ypsilanti, Michigan (Epstein, Schweinhart &amp; McAdoo, 1996)</p> <p>Preschool program which encourages observation of children's active learning</p> <p>Widely used in the USA and other parts of the world</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children plan, carry out and reflect upon their active learning. Plan-do-review is part of daily routine.</li> <li>• Program identifies 58 key experiences in 10 categories: creative representation, language and literacy, initiative and social relations, movement, music, classification, seriation, number, space and time.</li> <li>• Each category is further divided into specific experiences.</li> <li>• Curriculum is organized around the categories.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Careful systematic observations recorded daily.</li> <li>• Categories are basis for planning the program and the environment.</li> <li>• Educators assess, reflect on and respond to children's growth (e.g., child painting – use of routines in setting out and returning materials as well as quality of art representations).</li> <li>• Environment invites exploration and integration of learning.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The Project Approach:</b></p> <p>Extended in-depth exploration of topic by children</p> <p>Based on research about:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. how children learn; and</li> <li>2. the value of curriculum integration (Helm &amp; Katz, 2001; Katz &amp; Chard, 1992) <p>Adopted in a growing number of preschools and primary classrooms internationally</p> </li></ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A project is an in-depth investigation of a topic worth learning more about.</li> <li>• Aim is to cultivate the minds of children. Mind refers to knowledge, skills, emotional, moral and aesthetic sensibilities.</li> <li>• Preschoolers usually work in small groups.</li> <li>• Study may last one week or extend longer into three or four weeks.</li> <li>• Topics are drawn from the children's world.</li> <li>• Children's active participation is key.</li> <li>• Educators encourage children to pose questions, pursue ideas and to develop awareness of the world around them.</li> <li>• Project work is a large component of many preschool programs.</li> <li>• Provides contexts for children to follow their curiosity and experience the satisfaction of self-motivated learning.</li> <li>• Differs from themes in that children are very involved in planning and exploring the topic rather than following teacher-directed lessons.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourages rich experiences and deep thinking about a topic or area of interest.</li> <li>• Learning process and outcomes are visible as they occur together.</li> <li>• Children learn how to work together to accomplish their goals.</li> <li>• Children develop confidence in their learning approach and self-control.</li> <li>• Educators use skills of observation, problem solving, supporting, questioning and negotiating as they document the process and enrich the environment.</li> </ul>

## KEY RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Bilton, H. (Ed.). (2005). *Learning outdoors*. London: David Fulton Publishers.

This resource provides practical and theoretical aspects of design to enhance the outdoor space for young children in a range of early childhood settings including photographs of ideas. The book shows plans and written observations of how stimulating outdoor learning environments can be created.

Bredenkamp, S. & Copple, C. (Eds.). (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs* (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Part 4, pp. 97-138. Developmentally appropriate practice for three-through five-year olds, sketches the integrated development and learning characteristics of preschoolers.

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2000). *The art of awareness: How observation can transform your teaching*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.

This practical resource encourages educators to go beyond looking at children for supervision purposes to understanding what children are thinking. While participating in various activities, it offers tips for observing, gathering information and preparing documentation of the children's learning processes.

Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2003). *Designs for living and learning*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

The authors have expanded our vision of what is possible within settings planned for young children. Featuring beautiful photos from a variety of early learning and care situations, the book reconsiders the environment from the child's point of view. We are encouraged to draw inspiration from the author's visions and values.

Fraser, S. (2006). *Authentic childhood: Experiencing Reggio Emilia in the classroom* (2nd ed.). Toronto, ON: Nelson, Thomson Canada.

Fraser's seminal work of interpreting the Reggio Emilia early learning principles from a Canadian perspective has been enhanced in this second edition with further reflections on her impressions during a second visit to the city's preschools. The book includes a number of examples of Reggio-inspired project work from across the country.

Jones, E., & Nimmo, J. (1995). *Emergent curriculum*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

These authors describe the planning process to meet children's needs and interests as teachers and children interact with activities and combine their interests into an emerging curriculum.



## REFERENCES

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