



Healthy Child Manitoba
Putting children and families first

Starting Early, Starting Strong

A Guide for Play-Based
Early Learning in Manitoba
Birth to Six



Manitoba 

This document was developed in partnership by:

- Manitoba Education and Advanced Learning, Early Childhood Education Unit
- Manitoba Family Services, Early Learning and Child Care
- Manitoba Children and Youth Opportunities, Healthy Child Manitoba Office

The content within this document reflects the principles of *Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools*; *Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Infant Programs*; Manitoba's Kindergarten curricula; and *A Time for Learning, a Time for Joy: A Resource for Kindergarten Teachers*.

Introduction

Vision

All Manitoba children will:

- *have a healthy start to life*
- *have the protection of strong, nurturing families*
- *grow up in safe, secure and supportive environments*
- *live and thrive in strong communities*

Manitoba's early years educators¹ have a shared vision of children as being born ready for a great start in life. This vision values each child as a unique person with their own strengths, needs and developmental paths. Children are viewed as naturally curious and competent learners whose interests and prior knowledge are the foundation of joyful learning in purposeful, play-based environments. Educators of young children understand that the child's whole being develops best when their physical, social, emotional and cognitive needs are addressed in an interconnected and holistic way. At the heart of a child's healthy learning and development is honour for the child's family, culture and community. Nurturing relationships and a circle of support help the child to start strong and be prepared for lifelong growth, learning and success.

"A strong start in the early years provides all of our youngest citizens with the best and fairest chance to reach their fullest potential; their success is the key to a prosperous future for our province."

*Starting Early, Starting Strong,
Manitoba's Early Childhood
Development Framework
November 2013*

Purpose of the Document

While children's first source of learning and supportive relationships are their families, many of Manitoba's young children also attend child care, nursery school, child and family programs, or Kindergarten programs within the school system. This document provides a vision and a guide for these various early years programs to ensure children in Manitoba from birth to age six have the best possible start in life. This will happen through the curriculum that is developed and used in each of these programs.

This document is intended to complement and support, but not replace, requirements for the various early years programs in Manitoba. In early childhood settings, curriculum is not a list of objectives and outcomes that educators must follow; rather, it includes all the interactions, experiences, activities, routines and events, planned and unplanned, that occur in an environment designed to foster children's learning and development.

¹ In this document, the term "early years educator" refers to Kindergarten and nursery school teachers, early childhood educators, and program facilitators and others working with young children (birth to six years) and their families in all types of early learning programs.

Curriculum refers to how the educator organizes opportunities for children to learn throughout the day. Early years educators use their knowledge of children, their professional practice, especially aspects related to building and nurturing relationships, teaching and learning, and curriculum decision-making.


This guide is supported by a set of principles that are meant to guide the approach to the development and delivery of early learning programs and services. It will assist early years educators in developing curriculum for their programs.

"A growing body of research indicates that the experiences during the first 5 years of a child's life have a major bearing on his or her future success in school, in the workplace, and many other aspects of a healthy, fulfilling life."

Canadian Council on Learning,
2007

Guiding Principles

- **Support Learning Through Play:** This principle is the basis for all early learning programs. Play provides limitless possibilities for learning and development. Through play, children naturally learn about their surroundings, express their thoughts and feelings, advocate for their own points of view, and learn to respond to other people's perspectives.
- **View Children as Competent Learners:** Children are capable and active. They draw on their experiences to construct their own understandings of the world. Children differ in their strengths and capabilities, and each has his or her own developmental path.
- **Build Positive Relationships:** Children's learning is enhanced through strong family and community connections. Relationships between families and educators, adults and children, and children and their peers are built with frequent, positive interactions based on respect and open communication.
- **Prepare a Stimulating Environment:** Safe, healthy and engaging environments shape lifelong learning, development, behaviour, health and well-being.
- **Support Diversity and Inclusion:** Inclusion means that children of all abilities can participate equally in early learning programs. Recognizing and honouring diversity is very important to children's early learning experiences. Language and culture are important elements of children's unique identity and should be promoted by all programs.
- **Provide an Intentional Program:** An intentional curriculum includes a combination of child-initiated spontaneous play supported by engaged and intentional early educators, in balance with more focused experiential learning guided by the educators.



Early years educators are knowledgeable, responsive and reflective. They use all of these guiding principles in their work with young children and their families. Early years educators are essential to quality early learning programs. Participating as co-learners with children and their families, early years educators learn with children, about children, and from children (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 19). They are comfortable with diversity and cognizant of the many ways children communicate and express themselves.

Structure of the Document

A Guide for Play-Based Early Learning in Manitoba – Birth to Six is based on *Early Returns: Manitoba’s Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools*. The Birth to Six guide has been organized around the preceding guiding principles for high-quality early learning programs in Manitoba. Each principle is discussed in detail, and includes reflective questions for early years educators.

Continuous critical reflection, learning and growth is the basis of high-quality programs that are meaningful for the children and families they serve. We know that children learn through questioning and testing theories in their play. Similarly, when early years educators engage in continuous learning and questioning, exploring new ideas and adjusting practices, they achieve the best outcomes for children, families and themselves (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 20).

Support Learning Through Play

The positive emotions associated with play are as important as the skills they are building in creating a disposition that embraces learning.

British Columbia Early Learning Framework, 2008

Play is the natural way that children learn about their surroundings. Play is engaging, enjoyable and memorable. It is not a forced activity but, rather, spontaneous. Children choose how and when to participate in play.

When children play, they explore new skills and abilities. While playing, children have opportunities to learn as they discover, improvise, create or imagine. When they play with other children, social groups are formed, they test out ideas with each other, and they build new understandings.

Children's play is representational. It provides the foundation for literacy and numeracy. Through play, children practice flexible and divergent thinking; they encounter and solve problems; and they develop self-regulation skills.

Skills and concepts children learn through unstructured, open-ended play of their own design include:

- social skills and relationship building
- negotiation, conflict resolution and problem-solving
- empathy and self-regulation
- independence and safe risk-taking
- leadership
- communication skills
- organizational skills
- imagination and creativity
- wonder and curiosity



The role of early years educators is multidimensional. Early years educators are reflective practitioners who use many different approaches to learn about children. They listen and observe to learn how children make meaning through their experiences; they document children's play to understand them and use the information to evolve and plan the play-based curriculum. Early years educators provide meaningful play opportunities to enhance children's learning and development.

When children play with puppets, they can express their ideas and emotions, collaborate with others, and tell a story.

While there is certainly an important place for adult-guided learning in early learning programs, early years educators should avoid instructive lessons from the “sage on the stage” instructing lecture-style. Instead, early years educators adjust their approach based upon their observations of children and knowledge about their learning styles, responding to the teachable moments that present themselves. For example, at a time when a child seems ready to print his or her name, a brief mini-lesson on letter direction may be just what is needed for that particular child, but not for the entire group of children.

Strategies adults use to learn more about children’s learning through play include:

- joining in play with children
- role modeling a curious attitude
- using the five senses to explore play materials and encouraging children to do the same
- paying attention and listening to the ways children communicate, through their words, tone, gestures and body language and through the ways they represent their ideas by building, drawing, dancing, and writing
- making comments that deepen children’s thinking
- asking open-ended questions that allow children to talk about what they think
- being flexible to incorporate children’s interests in play or planned experiences
- watching and wondering what children may be thinking while they play
- being willing to learn along with the children in their programs

“Play gives children the opportunity to learn about themselves, to create and to innovate, and to learn how to make independent judgments. They also learn mutual respect and how to work with others.”

Elkind, 2007

When children play doctor, they self-regulate as they stay in character, while the plot unfolds. Children write their own prescriptions, showing how play supports literacy in an authentic context.



"Kindergarteners learn self-regulation best through activities in which the children - and not adults - set, negotiate, and follow the rules. These include make-believe play as well as games with rules."

Bodrova and Leong, 2008

CRITICAL REFLECTION – SUPPORT LEARNING THROUGH PLAY

The following questions are intended to help you reflect on and enhance the quality of your play-based program. As you consider each question, think about your current practices and how you might do things differently to support learning through play.

- How is play a significant part of your program?
- How can children express their ideas and explore their skills and abilities while they play?
- What skills and concepts are children learning through play?
- What is your role during children's play?
- How can you build on children's play to support new learning?
- How can you reflect with children about their new learning?



Include a variety of play materials to support all types of learning and development.

View Children as Competent Learners

Children are capable, active learners who draw on their experiences to construct their own understandings of the world. Children differ in their strengths and capabilities, and each has his or her own developmental path.

The early years are a period of intense learning and development, when tremendous changes occur in the brain. Decades of research show that early-life experiences shape the architecture of the brain. Thus, quality experiences in children's early years are critical for further social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.

Children are discovering new information about themselves and the world around them all the time. During play, children are practicing the processes of learning (i.e., the *how*) – focusing, remembering, planning – that help them to later master the content (i.e., the *what*) of learning – reading, writing, computation (Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University, 2011).

Quality play-based experiences in the early years are critical for children's development. For early years educators to provide quality experiences, knowledge of child development is essential. Knowledge of each individual child is also needed to make decisions about play-based curriculum. Early years educators actively take time to understand each child by observing, listening, interacting and reflecting. They consider how to design various learning opportunities to support each child in the program.

Learning is most effective when it extends from children's abilities and experiences. Children gain competence and confidence as they master new skills at their own pace. Curriculum for young children must be designed for children's current developmental level, yet provide opportunities that are challenging and within reach. Varied experiences provide opportunities for children to develop skills and learn concepts that are needed for later success. For example, to hold a pencil with control in Kindergarten, preschool children need many opportunities to practice fine motor skills by manipulating small objects such as paint brushes, scissors, shovels, building blocks and play dough during play.

"Curriculum is a major issue because we now know that infants and toddlers are competent learners and that the early years are an important foundation for learning in the later ones."

Gonzalez-Mena, Janet and Dianne Widmeyer Eyer, 2004

Children develop fine motor skills and learn about emotions, through sensory play with sand, water and other media.





Children, appropriately dressed for the weather, feed the birds as part of their daily outdoor, winter-play experience.

In early learning programs, early years educators design play-based environments to ensure that children are able to capitalize on learning opportunities. For example, in early learning programs that emphasize attachment, children begin to learn social skills through close, positive interactions. When early years educators encourage conversations between children engaged in parallel play, they support social development and build their interactions towards group co-operative play. When children are given inquiry-based projects in Kindergarten, they work together in small groups, which provides more opportunities for social learning and self-regulation development.

Young children make meaning through play and interaction: as they explore their homes, classrooms and communities; talk with family members and peers; share ideas, feelings and experiences; and make connections with others and the world around them. Early years educators extend children's thinking and learning by skilfully asking questions, making suggestions or providing open-ended materials that can extend children's ideas during play. This role is essential to support children's growth, learning and development in a play-based curriculum.

"Appropriate curriculum for infants should not be a special teaching plan added to their daily activities, but rather it should be incorporated in the infants' every experience."

Gerber, 1997

CRITICAL REFLECTION – VIEW CHILDREN AS COMPETENT LEARNERS

The following questions are intended to help you reflect on and enhance the quality of your play-based program. As you consider each question, think about your current practices and how you might do things differently to view children as competent learners.

- How do you get to know each child?
- What are the strengths and capabilities of each child?
- How can you build on children's play to develop their competence and confidence?
- What can you ask children, to extend and deepen their thinking?
- What materials and equipment can you include in the learning environment to strengthen and challenge children in all areas of their development?

Build Positive Relationships

Children's learning is enhanced through strong family and community connections. Relationships between families and educators, adults and children, and children and their peers are built with frequent positive interactions that are based on respect and open communication.

Positive interactions allow genuine relationships to develop and increase understandings of children and families. Spending time interacting with young children and their families helps to develop trusting, respectful relationships. These relationships, in turn, help both children and adults to feel comfortable in sharing their own interests, successes and challenges.

Conversations build problem solving skills and reveal children's prior knowledge. Children learn respect, empathy and self-regulation when they relate to other children, families and staff. These interactions also help family members to deepen their own understanding of their children's development and value learning through play. Relationships that support children, families and early years educators in early learning programs are built with frequent, positive interactions based on trust and open communication.



An early years educator fosters a respectful and trusting relationship with a young girl, as they share a planting experience together.

Children and Early Years Educators

Early years educators who hold a clear vision or image of children are able to provide sensitive responses that address all areas of children's development. They teach children respect by listening to them, encouraging them to communicate, and reassuring them that their feelings and experiences are valued. They take time to wait, watch and listen for children's responses during conversations, to gain understanding and expand on their ideas or thoughts. Relationships are supported when children are valued as unique individuals. Timely and respectful responses help develop a sense of trust and security among children.

Early years educators use positive interactions to foster growth and learning during children's play. They help children understand and use language as they interact during routines and play. For example, labelling and describing actions increases vocabulary and encourages conversations. Relating activities to experiences helps children reflect, discuss and share their thoughts and ideas. By offering experiences based on children's knowledge, relevant learning and development is supported. A play-based curriculum offers children different ways to interact with others, and the chance to learn by doing, with music, dramatic play, movement, creative art and group play. All of these positive interactions and experiences provide learning opportunities and build relationships that are essential to quality early learning programs.

Families and Early Years Educators

Early years educators recognize parents as the first and most important teachers in children's lives and families and communities as their most significant support. To practice in developmentally appropriate ways, early years educators must truly honour and respect families as the centre point of children's lives. This understanding deepens relationships, allowing for the development of partnerships that support the needs of children and families.

Early years educators recognize the unique strengths in every family and ask about each family's dreams for their children. Family values, beliefs and composition often come from the family's unique racial, ethnic, cultural and spiritual backgrounds, which may differ from the values and beliefs expressed in early learning programs. Despite these differences, early years educators are inclusive, and welcome and respect all family members. They respect family diversity by learning about cultures represented in their school or program and provide opportunities for learning about different cultural heritages in a respectful, holistic, positive way.

Early years educators consider how to build regular and active parent participation into programs for young children. Conversations are used to develop meaningful relationships, through sharing positive stories about children with their parents, and by talking about and showing documentation of children's play-based learning. This gives parents relevant examples of the learning and development that takes place for their children, each day. It also helps parents to understand why play is so important for their young children.

Developing and maintaining a strong relationship with each family is vital for understanding and meeting the needs of children. When early years educators commit to collaboration with families and aspire to continuity of experiences for young children, they actively involve all family members and other important adults in children's lives. Early years educators offer a truly family-centered approach and encourage capacity building through family-to-family connections.



Children and families learn new skills and deepen their relationships when they participate in programming together.

Among Children

Children need many opportunities to interact with each other. Peer interactions and relationships are important for children's social and emotional development. Early years educators watch for opportunities to encourage interactions among children. For example, children can be invited to use materials in pairs, join in informal group play experiences, or think of solutions to a problem together. A play-based curriculum creates daily opportunities for children to be near one another, and to interact and learn from each other during caregiving routines and play.

In early years programs, it is recommended that children have at least 45 minutes to one hour in a half-day program, for uninterrupted, self-directed play. Large blocks of time for free play support children to work together in small groups on inquiry-based discovery and pretend play. Direct supervision and interactions by caring adults in an engaging environment provides many opportunities for building positive relationships and friendships among children of different ages, cultures and abilities.

Early years educators consider ways to invite children into the curriculum planning process through discussions with children and by documenting ideas about children's play. Small and large group conversations and questions that focus on children's previous knowledge and current awareness help to determine possible directions for enhancing children's learning and development. This might lead to adding open-ended materials related to an area of interest to the environment for children to discover and explore together, or to offering planned activities based on the children's ideas during free play times. These opportunities for positive interactions and relationships help children learn valuable social skills that are important in preparing for success in school and in the future.



An open snack, where children choose when to eat, can help to develop friendships, encourage communication and language, and promote self-help skills.



A young boy develops his pincer grasp and hand-eye coordination while exploring an interest.

"In order to maximize the positive impact of play on children's learning and development, adults (parents) need to take an active role in enriching children's play experiences."

Johnson, Christie & Yawkey, 1999

Among Early Years Educators

Practices that offer a clear process for working in partnership to align experiences for young children and their families create stronger relationships between early years educators, as well as a sense of community and greater success for all. "An aligned and coordinated approach to education for children results in increased educational achievement for children at risk by reducing grade retention and special education categorization" (Bogard and Takanishi, 2005).

Helping children and their families prepare to transition between early learning programs requires coordination. A carefully planned transition provides parents and early years educators with opportunities to participate as equal partners in the transition process. Cooperation among early years educators and consideration of children's and families' needs during transitions between early learning programs helps provide children and families with a positive experience. To ensure continuity of experience for children and their families, a number of elements have been identified. For example, Kagan (1992) offers these strategies to promote success:

- written transition agreements between early learning programs, which outline roles and responsibilities, including the transfer of names and records
- attention to children's individual needs
- training for parents that offers information about early learning programs, the school system and available services
- visits by early years educators to early learning programs throughout the transition

When early years educators act in partnership and early learning programs are intentionally coordinated, young children experience consistency in education. Alignment of children's learning and development is enhanced when early years educators and parents work together to support children in early learning programs and at home.



Physically active, outdoor play is necessary for children in winter.

CRITICAL REFLECTION – BUILD POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The following questions are intended to help you reflect on and enhance the quality of your play-based program. As you consider each question, think about your current practices and how you might do things differently to build positive relationships.

- How much time do you spend getting to know children and their families?
- How can you develop trust and open communication with children? Families? Other early years educators?
- What are the different ways children interact with each other? With their families? With early years educators?
- How do you support children to grow and learn during interactions?



As early years educators spend time with individual children, they get to know children's interests and abilities, and can be sensitive to their needs and enrich their play.

Prepare a Stimulating Environment



A cozy home-like environment welcomes young children in nursery school, by encouraging comfort and a sense of belonging.

Safe, healthy and engaging environments shape lifelong learning, development, behaviour, health and well-being. Environments for learning encompass more than just the physical layout of the area. How the space appeals to the senses (aesthetics), the organization of time, and opportunities for sensory stimulation, social interaction, exploration or representation all help to promote children's sense of competence, mastery and independence.

The environment plays a key role in the quality of children's exploration and play. Indoor and outdoor spaces, materials, and furnishings (including how they are positioned), accommodations to ensure equitable learning opportunities and participation for children with special needs, as well as the general design of the space, and the organization of time, all have a significant influence on children's level of engagement and the possibilities for in-depth exploration and learning (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 36).



A writing centre provides a space for Kindergarten children to explore and experiment with different writing tools.

Children benefit from many opportunities to represent their ideas through playing with blocks, engaging in dramatic play, writing, painting or drawing. They learn and engage in play, in a rich environment designed to extend and build upon children's interests and program goals – one that reflects the diversity of children and their families and communities.

Environments that promote physical activity are necessary for healthy child development. Research has shown that being physically active enhances brain development, social skills, gross motor skills, coordination, emotions and imagination.



As children build with cardboard blocks, they experiment with their understanding of stability, height, weight and shape.

Learning through play is enhanced in a well-prepared, thoughtful environment that is safe, healthy and reflective of children's abilities, interests and needs. This involves careful arrangement of play areas, materials and time to stimulate children's interest and provide opportunities to sustain different types of play so that all children become independent explorers. Early years educators should try to imagine the learning environment from the children's point of view, as children see and experience the beauty and wonder of everyday moments. It is also important to extend the learning environment to the outdoors. Spending time in the outdoors supports children's growing awareness of their own connections with natural landscapes and phenomenon through emergent, experiential learning.

Providing open-ended materials for children to use in their own way encourages learning and development. For instance, children learn about mathematics by exploring concepts such as patterns and sorting when they play with beads, unifix cubes or other materials. Providing open-ended materials allows children to focus on the process of discovery and self-expression, rather than the product that they create. Materials that meet a range of developmental needs and abilities must be part of children's environments, to give them the opportunity to participate and learn in a meaningful way.

The environment can also help to create a sense of community when it reflects the diversity of the cultures of children and their families. By showing that each child's family, culture and language are valued, early years educators promote children's positive self-identity and help them to respect and appreciate similarities and differences among people. Parents and families can help in the selection of multicultural materials, books, play items, songs and stories to ensure that these items are authentic and that there are no offensive stereotypes presented (Copple and Bredekamp, 2009).



A child learns about the richness of the world – about the new and unexpected – through explorative play.



Hollow blocks used in different ways enhance children's imagination while stimulating gross motor development.



Access to gross motor equipment gives young children opportunities to be physically active and practice skills such as coordination and balance.

CRITICAL REFLECTION – PREPARE A STIMULATING ENVIRONMENT

The following questions are intended to help you reflect on and enhance the quality of your play-based program. As you consider each question, think about your current practices and how you might do things differently to prepare a stimulating environment.

- How much time do you spend preparing a stimulating environment?
- How can you arrange the play space and schedule so children can freely and safely move around and explore?
- How is your environment designed to extend and build upon children's interests?
- Where have you created a cozy place for children to be alone, relax and play quietly?
- What attractive and engaging materials have you provided that invite children to interact, explore, inquire, and investigate with others?
- Can you provide multiple items to reduce the amount of time that children wait for popular materials and equipment?
- How can you adapt materials to meet a variety of children's individual needs?



Children explore meaning, learn and develop through play and interaction in rich environments that are reflective of their abilities, interests and needs.

Support Diversity and Inclusion

Recognizing and respecting diversity and promoting inclusion are very important to early learning. Diversity refers to the range of similarities and differences among children, families and early years educators in the program and community. Inclusion is a way of thinking and acting so that every individual feels accepted, valued, and safe.

Diversity and inclusion enhance children's social and emotional well-being and promote caring, co-operative and equitable interactions with others (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2005). When children are together as part of the group, their development is supported and positive social attitudes are created. The goal of early learning programs in an inclusive society is to create environments where all children, family members and early years educators feel welcome.

Understanding the beliefs and values behind a variety of family practices helps families to feel accepted and supports their hopes and dreams for their children. Collaboration between home and early learning programs in a supportive community is essential for all children to feel successful. Continuity occurs when new environments build on children's previous experiences. For example, when early learning programs provide play materials that are familiar to children, their feelings of security, consistency and continuity of experience are developed. Similarly, when early learning programs offer information to families and encourage parent involvement, there is continuity of experience for parents. Self-esteem, confidence and emotional development are strengthened when children and families feel accepted and supported.



A child with Down Syndrome expresses himself through art.



A child who is visually impaired reads his own Halloween book with raised dots, a precursor to learning to read in Braille.



Including children's dolls that reflect the diversity of our province contributes to a sense of belonging and respect for diversity.

“All children have the right to have their culture acknowledged and respected. If this does not happen the children will not feel valued. By six months of age children are already beginning to notice similarities and differences in people. If they form positive attitudes towards differences, they are more likely to grow up appreciating diversity as a normal part of their lives” (Family Day Care Quality Assurance, 2005).

Opportunities for children to explore similarities and differences in a positive atmosphere support children’s respect for diversity. Early learning programs use inclusive practices to assist all children, including children with additional support needs and children who are newcomers

to Canada, to be active members of the group. An inclusive community reflects each child, family and early years educator and evolves to meet the changing needs of its members. Through recognition and support, an inclusive community provides meaningful involvement and equal access to the benefits of citizenship.

Providing opportunities for children to learn to respect others and to see their culture and language reflected in their learning environment is an essential component in early learning curriculum. Play materials and displays should respectfully reflect diversity and depict experiences that are familiar to children, so they can experience continuity between home and early learning programs. Providing real and meaningful items in the environment and using them in play with children exposes children to similarities and differences in a positive way.



Children learn colours in their first language, as well as in English.

Appropriate and effective practices that recognize the needs and contexts of diverse children and their families are important for children's success. All children should be valued, have friends and feel they belong. When early years educators take the needs of all children into consideration when planning for each day, they ensure the likelihood that children will develop a sense of belonging, where individual differences are seen as positive. Incorporating diversity and inclusion is valuable to children, families and early years educators because it strengthens understanding, appreciation and acceptance of one another.

“Effective educators believe that all children can learn. They create environments that invite students to learn, and they welcome diversity in their classrooms. Educators respond to the diverse needs of their students and ensure the success of all of their students by differentiating instruction based on their observations.” (Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, 2008)

CRITICAL REFLECTION – SUPPORT DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

The following questions are intended to help you reflect on and enhance the quality of your play-based program. As you consider each question, think about your current practices and how you might do things differently to support diversity and inclusion.

- What have you done to make play areas welcoming for all children and their families?
- How do you ensure that all children can access play materials that meet their needs, interests and abilities?
- What elements in the environment support children to develop a sense of well-being, identity and belonging?
- Where does each child see his or her family in the environment? Where are spaces for children's families and cultures to be represented?
- How does the play space promote acceptance of all children? Does it reflect the community surrounding the early learning program?

Provide an Intentional Program

A child-centred, intentionally planned curriculum includes a combination of child-initiated spontaneous play supported by engaged early years educators, in balance with more focused experiential learning guided by the educators.

Early years educators must consider how time for play and exploration is scheduled, to ensure large blocks of time for uninterrupted, free play. For instance, if the recommendation in early learning programs is 45 minutes to one hour in a half-day program, then full-day programs would require longer time, broken into multiple blocks of free play time throughout the day. Consistent, interesting and well-planned transitions between long periods of free play help children to feel secure because they learn to predict what is coming next. If most children are involved in play with each other, the transition can be delayed to give children more time to continue learning through play.

A child-centred curriculum includes a combination of spontaneous play and experiences designed around children's interests and needs to support their learning and development. It engages children in creating their own knowledge and learning through active involvement in play that encourages exploration, experimentation, critical thinking, and problem solving. When children have opportunities to choose and direct their play experiences based on their knowledge and interests, they are empowered to take the lead in their own learning. Children's learning and development are enhanced when their play opportunities are meaningful and relevant to their lives.

Early years educators use a variety of formats, including small and large groups, free choice time, and routines. They recognize the importance of both child-guided and adult-guided learning experiences. To support children's engagement during play and other child-guided activities, and to extend their learning, educators will employ a range of strategies such as asking questions, providing information, offering cues or suggestions, adding complexity or challenge to tasks, and providing opportunity and support for children to collaborate with peers.



In addition to building their physical, cognitive and emotional skills, two boys develop their social skills, as they collaborate and work together to complete a wooden block puzzle.

CRITICAL REFLECTION – PROVIDE AN INTENTIONAL PROGRAM

The following questions are intended to help you reflect on and enhance the quality of your play-based program. As you consider each question, think about your current practices and how you might do things differently to provide an intentional program.

- What materials and equipment are appropriate for stimulating children’s development and curiosity?
- How do indoor and outdoor spaces encourage exploration and learning?
- How do daily routines contribute to learning experiences?
- What do you do to incorporate teachable moments in the program?
- How do you adjust the program schedule to meet the needs of individual children?
- How do you plan the program to meet individual needs?
- How do you ensure that the daily schedule allows children to have large blocks of uninterrupted time to engage in self-directed play?

Conclusion

The Government of Manitoba is committed to supporting quality early learning programs. Play-based curriculum is an important way to support quality education and care for young children. Young children should be provided with a play-based curriculum that is developmentally appropriate, includes responsive interactions and relationships, and incorporates diversity and inclusion. Curriculum is founded on “nurturing and observing the curiosity of children and creating a condition for those interests to flourish” (Schwartz & Copeland, 2010). Early years educators are advocates for play-based curriculum because they recognize that “play nourishes every aspect of children’s development – it forms the foundation of intellectual, social, physical, and emotional skills necessary for success in school and in life” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2006).

An early years educator engages with and observes the actions of two children at play. Through this interaction, she develops relationships with and between the children, while learning about their interests. She can use this information for planning in the future.



Viewing children as active participants and decision makers opens up possibilities for early years educators to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn. This requires early years educators to respect and work with each child's unique qualities and abilities.

Professional judgments are central to maintaining an active role in facilitating children's learning. In making professional judgments, early years educators utilize their:

- professional knowledge and skills
- knowledge of children, families and communities
- awareness of how beliefs and values impact children's learning
- personal styles and past experiences

They also draw on their creativity, intuition and imagination to help improvise and adjust their practice to suit the time, place and context of children's learning.

Early years educators "...create pockets of hope where children experience the joy, vitality, richness, pleasures and challenges of unfettered play...The children who play there will take with them the seed of productivity, support, nurturance and courage throughout their lives..." (Bos, Bev & Chapman, J., 2005, p. 158).



A child learns about shapes, patterns and textures during uninterrupted, self-directed play time.

Requirements for Early Learning Programs in Manitoba

In licensed Early Learning and Child Care facilities in Manitoba, infant, preschool and nursery school programs are required to develop a Curriculum Statement to describe their program to parents and community members. A clear Curriculum Statement helps early years educators to provide intentional and purposeful curriculum to create meaningful and relevant learning opportunities for children from age 12 weeks to 6 years. It also strengthens accountability to children, parents, management and the public to provide play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum, as described in *Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools* and *Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Infant Programs*.

Manitoba's Kindergarten curriculum is outcomes-based and organized into seven subject areas: arts education, language arts, mathematics, physical education/health education, science and social studies and English as an Additional Language. Each curriculum area identifies student learning outcomes, what students are expected to know and be able to do by the end of the Kindergarten year.

Four required foundation skill areas are also incorporated into curriculum from Kindergarten to Grade 12, including literacy and communication, problem solving, human relations, and technology. Daily plans are designed around observing, documenting, and interpreting the actions of children and their achievements. Each day is well-planned and yet flexible enough to allow opportunities for children to work towards achieving outcomes integrated across subject areas, and to explore their interests through play.

Family resource programs are not licensed or regulated in Manitoba. Healthy Child Manitoba has adapted child care regulations in the manual, *On the Road to Best Practice: Recommended Guidelines for Parent Child Programs*. While there are currently no specific requirements for programs offered through Community Schools or Parent Child Coalitions, these programs are strongly encouraged to adhere to developmentally appropriate play-based learning principles.

Internet Resources

Canadian Child Care Federation www.cccf-fcsge.ca

Child Care Exchange www.childcareexchange.com

Children & Nature Network www.childrenandnature.org

Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development www.child-encyclopedia.com

Healthy Child Manitoba www.manitoba.ca/healthychild

How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years
www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/HowLearningHappens.pdf

This document is a professional learning resource guide about learning through relationships for those working with young children and families. It is intended to support pedagogy and curriculum/program development in early years programs.

Manitoba Child Care Association www.mccahouse.org

Manitoba Early Learning and Child Care www.manitoba.ca/childcare

Manitoba Education ECE-Unit www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/childhood

Manitoba Parent Zone www.manitobaparentzone.ca

Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide
www.education.gov.sk.ca/ELCC/play-and-exploration-program-guide

The intention 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.

The Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development
www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca

The Science of Early Child Development www.scienceofecd.com

Young Children www.naeyc.org/yc

Zero to Three National Centre for Infants Toddlers and Families
www.zerotothree.org

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For more information

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300 – 332 Bannatyne Avenue
Winnipeg, MB R3A 0E2
204-945-2785
www.manitoba.ca/healthychild

For more resources on parenting

1-877-945-4777
www.manitobaparentzone.ca

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