



Educators Supporting Indigenous Families: Relationships

In spring 2021, the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC) and MacEwan University conducted focus groups with in-service educators who support Indigenous families. Many themes were derived from these conversations, including that **engaging in a reflective practice of relationships, not focusing solely on programming or activities, can meet the needs of Indigenous children and families.**

A Practice of Relationships as a Curriculum

A practice of relationships in child care means moving beyond a traditional curriculum format and placing emphasis on forming genuine connections with families. While programming is integral to any learning environment, educators agree that engaging with families about their children’s learning is also essential to providing quality care. A relational approach involves consistent and

authentic communication with families about what is important to them, and results in curriculum decisions that are relevant and meaningful.

Educator Dispositions

In the focus groups, individuals identified various characteristics that guide educators in their practice with children and families. In relation to the specific theme – a practice of relationships as a curriculum – educators shared the following dispositions valued in the field:



Inquisitiveness



Empathetic



Openness



Authentic



Educator Voices from the Field

Educators agreed that building relationships with children and their families is paramount in early learning environments. Educators considered a relational approach when implementing programming into child care. One educator stated that they take a “holistic approach” to programming, stating, “I’m not going to approach a family and say, ‘You’re Indigenous, how do you want this to happen?’ It’s more of, ‘Hey, you’re one of our families, how do you want this to happen?’” This speaks to the importance of individualized support as each family is unique; therefore, educator-family relationships should also be.

Relationship to Flight

A consistent theme explored in the *Flight* Framework is a practice of relationships: the creation of authentic connections with family members and children from diverse backgrounds (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014, p. 50 - 51). The Framework emphasizes the educator as a “co-researcher,” which involves taking the initiative to understand, explore, and reflect on the experiences of children and their family (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 50). A relational practice moves beyond a traditional focus of programming and extends into the needs of others. Educators must seek out what is important and valued by families to create a solid foundation for connection; getting to know people on a more personal level (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 49-56). Refer to the *Flight* website offered in the references section for access to additional information and teachings.

Barriers

Educators express that a lack of communication and differences in values may become a challenge when creating relationships with families. A disposition of openness and the willingness to engage in authentic conversations is needed; otherwise, barriers to relationship building occur.

Strategies

- Educators can share information with families about their children’s day during drop-off and pick-up times to initiate authentic conversations and build a foundation of trust.
- Educators can support families’ beliefs and experiences by engaging in conversations that are meaningful to them. For instance, if a family is interested in learning more about specific programming, legislation or resources, an educator can take the initiative to support their request by connecting them to community resources, listening to different perspectives and learning something new.
- Educators can take a genuine interest in children and their families by including them in programming decisions, inviting them to celebrations, and offering opportunities for families to share their experiences in a trusting, and safe environment.
- Working from a practice of relationships, educators can inform themselves of the historical and ongoing social, political and economic effects on Indigenous families and the resulting complexity of family experiences to encourage an inclusive childcare experience and increase the vitality of community.
- Educators can welcome all forms of family structures in policy and practice decisions, recognizing that there are various definitions of family that extend beyond the western perspective (parents and children). For example, educators can support



families during pick-up and drop-off times, including other family members (aunts/uncles/cousins) who may pick the child up.

Through a practice of relationships, this can be coordinated with families in advance to ensure the child gets home safely and the families feel welcomed.

Recommendations

- Educators can read the additional “inspirations for practice” documents to fully understand the themes and how they work in conjunction with each other.
- Educators can seek knowledge from other organizations, professionals, and families to engage in the process of life-long learning.
- Educators can search the Edmonton Council of Early Learning and Care website and click on the ‘resources’ link to gain additional knowledge and learn more about different organizations/partnerships in the area: <https://www.ecelc.ca/resources>
- Educators can visit the Flight website to learn more about working from a practice of relationships and building a positive image of the family: flightframework.ca

References

Makovichuk, L., Hewes, J., Lirette, P., & Thomas, N. (2014). *Flight: Alberta’s early learning and care framework*. Retrieved from flightframework.ca