



Educators Supporting Indigenous Families: Accessing Child Care

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 **families’ ability and feasibility to access and engage with child care must be at the forefront of policy, program and practice decisions.**

The Challenges of Childcare for Indigenous Families

Many Indigenous families shared that they face numerous barriers when accessing a childcare facility. These challenges include cost, transportation, and the lack of understanding of Indigenous culture. Full-time childcare programs are often costly, even with access to financial resources such as subsidy. Additionally, many families shared that location and hours of operation significantly

affect access to quality childcare (for example, finding childcare close to public transportation). Lastly, families shared that misunderstandings and judgments about their culture can create a hostile environment; therefore, affecting the childcare experience.

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 – challenges of childcare for Indigenous families– educators shared the following dispositions valued in the field:



Openness



Flexibility



Empathy



Willingness to learn and grow



Educator Voices from the Field

Educators shared that flexibility and openness are integral to understanding and mitigating the challenges of childcare for Indigenous families. One educator stated that “because of our hours at our centre, we’re not very flexible.” However, the educator approached the situation with empathy and “just asked for communication; like oh if your bus is late just text us or call us and just have that communication there.” While this does not take the barrier away, it significantly helped alleviate some pressure. Most educators agreed that identifying these challenges is only the first step to creating an inclusive childcare environment accessible to all.



Relationship to Flight

Educators who invite participation from families by incorporating culture, beliefs, and values into childcare create places of vitality, which strengthens community (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014, p. 145). According to *Flight*, environments that foster consistent and healthy relationships increase the wellbeing of children and their families (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 92-96). Educators must be flexible and respectful to the lived experiences of others, promoting intercultural competence, which values and appreciates differences (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 7 and 21). When educators recognize that there are multiple ways of interacting, living, and learning, childcare becomes inclusive and meets the needs of families, which makes it more accessible (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 92). Refer to the *Flight* website offered in the references section for access to additional information and teachings.

Barriers

As stated above, financial barriers and access to reliable transportation severely affect the quality of childcare families receive. Another challenge noted by participants in the focus group is the number of educators who share their cultural background. One educator shared that they understand the impact culture has on the quality of childcare. Instead of sending their children to educators who are not understanding or educated on their experiences, they may opt for “spending time with their more extended family who have had that shared experience or have that shared history.”

Strategies

- Educators can consider the diverse needs of families within programming itself. For example, educators can acknowledge the fact that family circumstances can always change and strive to implement activities that are low-cost.
- Educators can work from a strength-based approach and engage in a practice of relationships with families to promote consistent and respectful communication. For example, educators can meet families where they are at, to understand challenges associated with transportation. Families appreciate it when educators take their circumstances into consideration and view their life experiences from a positive lens.
- When appropriate, educators can research and provide additional resources for families to lessen the stress associated with transportation (such as access to bus passes). It is important to note that this should be family led; in other words, educators work with families.
- Educators can engage with families from a relational perspective to learn about their experiences and culture. Communication that is family led offers a trusting and safe childcare experience.

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, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, 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 advocate for more affordable childcare options for families. There are many levels to advocacy and it looks different for every person. For example, educators can bring finances to the attention of supervisors during meetings, they can connect them to financial and community resources, and engage in a practice of relationships with families. Note that advocacy should be discussed with families in advance.

References

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