



Physical Environment

In spring 2021, the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC) and MacEwan University conducted four case studies with childcare directors and senior staff to learn how support for newcomer and Indigenous families can be realized in the Edmonton region. Many themes were derived from these conversations, including that for some sites **the use of physical environment to explore and share culturally based approaches is valued.**

Use of Physical Environment to Explore and Share Culturally Based Approaches

In the case studies, centres spoke about the importance of utilizing the physical environment to capture families' cultures; creating a space that is safe, familiar, and reflective of their lived experiences. Simply put, centres would intentionally add objects, provide various programming materials, facilitate experiences, and incorporate culturally relevant supports into the space to honour the children and families they serve. Each centre shared specific examples of how they arrange their environment through the lens of culture:

At the **newcomer-focused centre**, educators strive to create a culturally responsive environment that reflects the lived experiences of children and their families:

- First, the centre integrates multilingual and multicultural objects (such as books, art, images, music, etc.) into the learning space to foster belonging. This creates an environment that is reflective of children's' identity, which promotes wellbeing.

- Additionally, the centre also acknowledges the importance of offering traditional meals where the food provided aligns with what families prepare at home. They intentionally arrange their meal planning based on the children and families they support.
- Through the use of material and space, this centre intentionally creates an atmosphere that is welcoming and reflective of the children and families they serve. The centre strives to create a comforting space where people feel a part of the larger community.

At the **Indigenous-focused centre**, the physical environment is integral to creating a quality childcare experience:

- The centre arranges experiences, space, and materials to create a calming environment. One participant shared that "it's super open, bright, very calming to come into and usually smells like smudge, which is amazing. It's very welcoming. It's such a good home feeling."
- Additionally, the centre highlights the importance of connecting with the natural environment and offers children an opportunity to engage with nature through outdoor play and art that reflects their surroundings.
- Overall, the centre works with children and families to provide a childcare experience that reflects Indigenous cultures and the significance of the environment. This centre makes decisions through the lens of culture, and this is reflected in the way they present their learning space.

Relationship to Flight

The physical environment of an early learning centre can influence the quality of childcare children and families receive. According to the *Flight* Framework, intentional use of materials and space can stimulate exploration, strengthen identity, and create a learning environment that reflects and supports the needs of children (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014, p. 82-89). This Framework encourages centres to involve families in designing these spaces to incorporate their culture and foster belonging (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 86). Learning environments that are “rich in materials and role models that reflect the cultural life of their communities (the songs, crafts, language and artifacts)” increase the vitality of community, offering a safe space for children and families (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 99). Refer to the *Flight* website offered in the references section for access to additional information and teachings.

Recommendations and Next Steps

- Childcare centres can include families in the decision-making process when designing the layout, choosing materials (books, toys, objects, etc.), and selecting images/decorations displayed in the room. The intentional organization of a childcare space that reflects families’ cultural identities is integral to safety, security, and wellbeing.
- Childcare centres that provide meals for children can consider expanding the menu to include food that reflects what families may eat at home. Incorporating cultural or traditional meals encourages children to develop their knowledge, discover new foods, and promote a learning experience that fosters diversity and inclusion.
- Childcare centres can expand their programming to include outdoor play, allowing children to interact with nature. The



natural environment is often an essential aspect in many cultures. Therefore, giving children the opportunity to interact with their surroundings fosters identity and provides space for children to explore through a culturally based approach.

- Childcare centres can adopt a flexible approach when creating a childcare environment to ensure that learning experiences are reflective and responsive to the children and families supported. For example, centres can work from a practice of relationships to build connections and engage in authentic conversation to learn what each family may need, creating a more welcoming and safe environment.
- Childcare centres can refer to the additional “inspirations for leading” documents to fully understand the themes and how they work in conjunction with each other.
- Centres 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>

References

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