



## Fostering Relationships

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 all sites **a practice of relationships is integral to meeting families where they are at.**

### Working From a Practice of Relationships to Meet Families Where They Are At

In the case studies, centres spoke about the importance of working from a relational lens to offer a quality childcare experience. A practice of relationships refers to a dynamic where educators “learn with and alongside families...to create places of vitality in early learning and child care for the benefit of children, as social learners and citizens” (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014, p. 146). Each centre describes how they encourage a practice of relationships in their program:

At the **newcomer-focused centre**, educators are encouraged to create lasting connections with families through a relational lens:

- In other words, they aim to meet others where they are at by honouring families “as an individual family with their own family culture.” The ability to maintain relationships and foster respect is integral to this centre’s objectives and is reflected in their foundational principles: the “community of practice theory.”

At the Indigenous-focused centre, a relational practice is integral to offering support in a culturally relevant manner:

- For example, participants shared that they consider culture when communicating with families, including specific practices around eye contact and using Indigenous names when possible. A practice of relationships is emphasized to create connections and respect families’ lived experiences. One participant shared that they “just enjoy conversations and catching up. It’s nice just building those relationships for sure. And I hope that within the next little while we can start inviting Elders to come in and share stories and experiences.”

At the **Indigenous-focused centre**, the Executive Director shared that a shift in programming has occurred in recent years, emphasizing relationship building with families:

- At this centre, educators are encouraged to engage in authentic conversation with children and their families to build trust and foster belonging. For instance, one participant explained how intake forms are now completed with families to offer an opportunity to create those connections. An expectation for “responsive and reciprocal” relationship building with families is highlighted in their policy. This practice of relationships with families then guides children’s experiences in this learning environment.

At the centre with experience working with Indigenous children and families, a guiding principle that informs their practice is a collaboration with families through relationship building:

- Their goal is to serve the community and provide the support that develops children’s safety, wellbeing, and identity. According to the participants, “really speak[ing] to [and] engaging with families in an authentic way” builds trust and “creates partnerships and relationships.” Therefore, educators are expected to engage in authentic conversations with families to provide a welcoming learning environment that fosters belonging.

## Relationship to Flight

Approaching childcare from a relational lens fosters learning opportunities and creates connections between individuals. According to *Flight*, a practice of relationships “describes the complex and dynamic relationships with diverse community members and begins with educators who are willing to learn with and alongside children and families” (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014, p. 146). Essentially, taking that genuine interest in a child’s life increases the quality of care they receive. Educators that respect families’ funds of knowledge and take the initiative to engage in genuine conversations with others increases security, wellbeing, and belonging (Makovichuk et al., p. 4-7). Refer to the *Flight* website offered in the references section for access to additional information and teachings.

## Recommendations and Next Steps

- Childcare centres can implement a relational practice into their program and policies to emphasize the role connections play in early learning. For example, a centre can highlight relationship building in job descriptions and other professional documents to ensure staff understand what is expected of them to build trust and create a welcoming environment for children and families.



- Childcare centres can support their educators when engaging with families by introducing them to the Flight Framework. This resource offers staff access to evidence-based research, videos, strategies, and learning materials to help them develop their practice of relationships with children and families: <https://flightframework.ca>
- Working from a practice of relationships, directors, and supervisors in childcare centres can model this relational approach when working with children, families, staff, and community members. When leadership takes the initiative to engage in authentic conversations with others, it inspires other educators to follow this approach.
- Childcare centres can inform themselves on families’ complex and changing experiences (including historical, social, economic, cultural, and political contexts) to create an inclusive childcare environment. Centres can learn from families and listen to what they want regarding childcare. All families are unique; therefore, support should be individualized and family-led.
- 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](https://flightframework.ca)