



# What We Heard About Child Care

Focus Groups with Educators & Indigenous Families

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## Executive Summary

In 2020, the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC) and MacEwan University began a joint research project to explore the following research questions:

1. For Indigenous families, what are indicators of quality in early learning and child care?
2. What are the essential dispositions child care educators demonstrate that meet the needs of Indigenous children and families?

To seek answers to these questions, and following the completion of a scoping review to determine relevant academic literature, researchers engaged in a series of focus groups with Indigenous families as well as educators who have experience working with Indigenous children and families.

Focus group discussions revealed the following themes:

- There is an identified need for educators and programs to support family cultures in child care environments, but this process must be determined and led by families
- Engaging in a reflective practice of relationships, not focusing solely on programming or activities, can meet the needs of Indigenous children and families
- For some Indigenous families, the role of trust is key in their relationships with educators
- Families' ability and feasibility to access and engage with child care must be at the forefront of policy, program and practice decisions
- *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* influences centres' abilities to offer quality child care with qualified staff

Findings from focus groups with educators who support Indigenous children and families indicate that educators believe that *a practice of relationships* as described in *Flight* is essential for high-quality support of Indigenous families and children (Makovichuk, Hewes, Lirette, & Thomas, 2014). When a practice of relationships includes the meaningful participation and active engagement of families in the decisions regarding the care of their children, this also reflects the childcare recommendations in Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action (TRC, 2015).

Based on these findings, it is recommended that:

- Educators receive professional learning opportunities to engage in their work with concepts from *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* (Makovichuk et al., 2014)
- Future research be conducted to explore voices and experiences of Indigenous families not captured with these findings
- Immediate follow up research be conducted regarding how child care centres currently conceptualize, act on, and respond to the themes presented above

## Introduction

Child care can play a pivotal role in influencing child and family well being, especially for children and families experiencing periods of vulnerability (Friendly, 2006; Japel, 2009). Ball (2014) shares that “the extent to which a solid foundation is built in early childhood depends upon many intersecting determinants that create the conditions for quality of life for young children and their families” (p. 2). For some Indigenous families, access to quality child care is vital to address the numerous and complex challenges they may face (Ball, 2012; Preston, 2008).

Quality child care can offer Indigenous families and their children supports while parents advance their own education and/or obtain employment (Boulanger, 2018). However, experiences of Indigenous families with child care vary greatly, particularly between rural settings and urban contexts. In Canada, Indigenous children are less likely to attend early learning and child care programs compared to non-Indigenous children (Ball, 2014). Additionally, the steady migration of Indigenous families into urban settings has placed pressure on Indigenous-focused early learning and child care programs, as well as highlighted the need for mainstream child care programming to meet the needs of Indigenous families (Scott, 2013).

In order to further explore the variation in experiences of Indigenous families accessing child care, in the spring of 2020 the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care (ECELC) and MacEwan University began a joint research project. Specifically, the project focused on two research questions:

1. For Indigenous families, what are indicators of quality in early learning and child care?
2. What are the essential dispositions child care educators demonstrate that meet the needs of Indigenous children and families?

To answer these questions, researchers first conducted a scoping review of current academic literature (Freeborn, Mardhani-Bayne, & Soetaert, 2021). The scoping review identified exemplars and potential indicators of quality as determined by existing academic literature focused on the experiences of Indigenous families. These exemplars were then used by researchers to create questions to which focus group participants responded. This “What We Heard” document highlights the outcomes of these focus groups.

## Definitions

While varying definitions are used throughout the literature, for the purposes of this research project, several definitions are used here and in the focus groups. We use the term ‘Indigenous’ to signify “persons of First Nations, Inuit or Métis descent, regardless of where they reside and whether their

names appear on an official register. Self-identification is a fundamental criterion for defining Indigenous peoples" (Government of Canada, n.d.).

Additionally, 'child care,' 'child care centre,' and 'centre' are used interchangeably to refer to the out-of-home spaces where children under the age of six years old are cared for by adults other than their family members, including licensed child care. The term 'educator' is used to denote the employed individuals who plan and care for children in child care centres.

Finally, the term 'dispositions' refers to the "tendencies [of educators] to respond to situations in particular ways" (Ministry of Education, 2017, p. 22 as cited in Davitt & Ryder, 2019, p. 20). The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2002) defines dispositions as "the values, commitments, and professional ethics that influence behaviours ... as well as the educator's own professional growth" (p. 53).

## Focus Groups

Potential focus group participants were identified through existing networks and stakeholders associated with ECELC. Researchers relied on these networks and the support of ECELC members to reach potential participants. Members of these networks received emailed information about the study as an invitation to participate in the form of a letter outlining the purpose of the study, their role, and potential time commitment. Once potential participants expressed an interest in participating, they were given a copy of the consent form to review.

The questions that guided these focus group conversations were based on thematic outcomes from the scoping review but remained largely centred on experiences of and with Indigenous families, in order to ensure that data collected were specific to the Edmonton context. A complete list of questions is available under [Notes from Focus Groups](#).

Researchers conducted five focus groups made up of Indigenous parents (n=2) and in-service early childhood educators (n=8). Separate focus groups for Indigenous families and child care educators were held virtually.

Each focus group began with MacEwan University's Land Acknowledgment, and then offered introductions to the research team members in attendance. The consent process, including explanation of study purpose, highlighted participation in focus groups as indication of consent. The research team also asked participants not to share private information heard from others in the focus group. Finally, the researchers explained the process of the focus group: researchers offering one question, providing everyone a chance to answer individually, and once everyone has had a chance to respond, offering an additional chance through an open format for participants to respond again.

Then, researchers moved on to the next question. Researchers also offered participants the definitions for Indigenous as was used for the scoping review as well.

At the conclusion of the focus group, researchers shared the next phase of the project, and let participants know of the ways to contact researchers if they had any more to share at a later date. They also thanked everyone and offered additional information regarding the honoraria and how that was to be shared with participants.

This "What We Heard" document considers the responses from both Indigenous families as well as educators who shared their experiences working with Indigenous families.

## Data

In order to analyze the collected responses from focus group participants, researchers first ensured that the transcripts from the focus groups were clear, complete and readable. This was achieved by cross referencing the recording transcripts with detailed notes taken by the research assistant during the focus groups. The transcript texts from focus groups were then compiled (one for family focus groups and one for educator focus groups), and transferred to an excel spreadsheet.

To indicate respondents each participant was assigned a one or two letter value in the spreadsheets. Themes from participants' responses were then coded and tracked by creating additional columns and naming emerging themes in columns, indicating relevant themes with a "1" in the appropriate row and column. This method allowed researchers to identify how each participant's responses related to the emerging themes as well as each others' responses. This method also offered a "pulse" on how prevalent a theme was compared to other themes.

Educator participants shared the following information about themselves in their introductions:

EDUCATOR PARTICIPANTS			
<b>E</b> Educator; 5 years experience; currently works with Indigenous children and families	<b>I</b> Family support worker; 5 years experience; currently works with Indigenous children and families	<b>S</b> Educator; did not share years of experience; currently works with Indigenous children and families	<b>N</b> Out of school care educator; 4 years experience; limited work with Indigenous children and families

<p><b>O</b></p> <p>Educator; 7 years experience; currently works with Indigenous children and families</p>	<p><b>C</b></p> <p>Educator and educator mentor; 7 years experience; currently works with Indigenous children and families</p>	<p><b>D<sub>A</sub></b></p> <p>Educator; 7 years experience; currently works with Indigenous children and families</p>	<p><b>D<sub>B</sub></b></p> <p>Childcare specialist; 20 years experience; limited work with Indigenous children and families</p>
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Indigenous family participants shared the following information with the research team:

<p>FAMILY PARTICIPANTS</p>
<p><b>M</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Had a previous personal experience with the daycare</li> <li>• Previously had child in an early intervention based program but it became too expensive</li> <li>• Describes experience as "getting the best care" for their children in the centre they are currently attending</li> </ul>
<p><b>B</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Has a one year old child attending childcare program</li> <li>• Centre was convenient for family</li> <li>• Had heard really good things about the centre prior to attending</li> <li>• Received a referral from another organization prior to attending</li> </ul>

Five core themes emerged from the cross referencing of themes from the family as well as educator focus groups. These identified themes are described in the following section.

**Identified Themes**

For each of five focus groups, participants' feedback and perspectives were reviewed and analyzed for themes across sessions and participants. Although questions differed slightly between educator and family focus groups, broader question categories were based on themes resulting from the scoping review (please see detailed list of questions at the end of this document). As questions between educator and family focus groups interrelate, thematic understandings can be drawn across all five focus groups. Such themes are important to explore as they bridge understandings between educators and families regarding what is currently happening in Edmonton childcare environments for Indigenous children and families, and can help to inform future research, practice and policy decisions.

Although there is limited voice captured from Indigenous parents in this process, we honour the participants that were able to attend, and what participants shared through this process in the virtual environment. Quotations from participants are included in quotation marks to offer additional insight and to honour the voices of both families as well as educators. This distinction is captured as well.

□ **Theme 1: Support for cultures in child care environments**

Educator participants expressed their desire to engage with families regarding their home and community culture, but emphasized that this engagement must be led by families, and from a "respectful position." One educator shared that this process is part of developing a relationship with families, through talking and asking questions, and comes from a place of "wanting to understand what they do as a family and all of their interests and how much they indulge in their culture and how much they want to share with us."

Another participant shared that the connections educators make with families' home cultures is at "the forefront of building community as a room, building community as a centre, and a community in our general community." This educator participant expressed her appreciation for having had many opportunities to learn more about families' experiences incorporating culture into their lives. Being also Indigenous, the educator shared that they created moss bags for all of the rooms at the centre. "Having those cultural items accessible for children to explore, I think, really brings culture into your community. It's a very positive way to reinforce your relationship with families."

A number of educators shared the specific culturally based activities that some staff are involved in at their centres. One centre, with a goal to offer participants and staff opportunities to engage in cultural experiences and integrate culture into programming, has created a team of Indigenous staff members whose role is to share cultural teachings with others. Prior to COVID-19, this team included an Elder: "Before COVID, [the Elder] was coming in every Tuesday and we'd do a smudge ceremony in the morning. Then she'd come visit every room in our childcare center, and then she'd go and do birthing and beading with our moms on site. It's been really good."

□ **Theme 2: A practice of relationships as curriculum**

Both educator and family participants shared the importance of relationship building and a focus on relationships as a paramount conduit for positive child care experiences. Families acknowledged that this practice of relationships transcends the content of what children are learning. When asked to share about what aspects of programming are working well for them, families shared stories of how educators engage with them about their children's learning. One participant shared that "they tell me what he does all day, and I go in to give him his meds. So they just talk to me for 10 minutes about what he's been doing all day, when he goes down for a nap, what he eats at the end of the day. We



have a whole meeting type thing that they tell us everything that he did. And when he ate, and when he napped, and how much he drank and everything. They tell us everything."

One participant shared that an educator has been supporting her request from Jordan's Principle, a child-first principle aiming to ensure that all Indigenous children living in Canada can access the services and support they need (Government of Canada, n.d.). "They really are trying to put into perspective different nationalities and seeing the struggles between everyone else, including the Indigenous people as well. I think it's really good. They do a lot of programs on the side as well that help Indigenous families. And I think that they really take initiative in everybody's struggles."

One educator participant expressed the unique ways in which they consider how to approach programming and relationships with families, how programming and a practice of relationships are intertwined, and how they seek to meet the unique needs of each family. "I think that we do this in a holistic approach, 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?'"

#### □ **Theme 3: Fostering trust as a pivotal educator disposition**

Family participants, when asked about the importance of trust in their relationship with educators, expressed the importance of trust being a pivotal component in a practice of relationships. One family participant shared their level of trust, how it was built over time, and how they know that they can trust the educators that work with their child: "I trust them a lot. Yeah. I trust all of them. [Trust] was built over time. With my son, it just got easier for him. And I saw that he wanted to actually go there, and when I opened his class door, he would smile and just run in. So I knew that he liked it there."

Another family participant echoed a similar experience with their child by sharing the progression from "my children used to cry for me" to "now it's like, my son runs and he goes straight to his room. He knows where it is. So I just know that they're happy every day they go there. Every time I go pick them up, they're just happy. And honestly, my one time, my baby cried when we left and I'm like, don't worry, you're going to go back."

#### □ **Theme 4: The challenges of childcare for Indigenous families**

Both educator participants and family participants expressed the importance of Indigenous families' ability to access childcare when necessary, and shared the barriers that prevent families' full participation. One family participant shared that they were seeking full-time spaces for their children, but cost was a significant prohibitive factor. "But even with subsidy, like that's definitely out of our price range. Even with subsidy having the two in there, it's going to cost over I think \$700, \$800. And that's just too much that we could afford right now. And as much as I'd love to, it's hard. It's tough. We don't live in subsidized housing. So we pay full rent for our utilities, everything. So it's even maybe

without paying for rent and stuff. I think it still would be a struggle because it does get quite expensive."

Another challenge for Indigenous families accessing child care raised by numerous participants was transportation. One educator participant shared empathy for family circumstances surrounding transportation that became a barrier for child care participation at the centre the family desired. "Because of our hours at our centre, we're not very flexible. We have 07:30 to 17:30, which is very limited. And so [the parent] just really found, she was telling me that she just found it just too stressful, and of course we were understanding, we knew that this mom bussed, and that we communicated to her that we understand that you're catching a bus, but we just asked for communication like oh if your bus is late just text us or call us and just have that communication there. But definitely one big factor was that she was able to fit her kid into a centre that was just way closer to their home."

Another educator questioned the role that understanding of Indigenous history and contemporary issues by staff at child care centres may play in access to childcare for Indigenous families, and whether this may then act as a barrier for some families. "Is that rather than sending their children to strangers that don't know anything about Indigenous history, don't know anything about Indigenous culture, don't know anything about Indigenous issues, contemporary issues for Indigenous communities compared to sending it to, spending time with their grandparents, spending time with their aunts and uncles, spending time with their more extended family who have had that shared experience or have that shared history. I wonder if it's just, they're more inclined to want to pursue those child care, that kind of child care as well, rather than going to a centre."

#### □ **Theme 5: Qualified staff and the influence of *Flight***

Educator participants as well as family participants expressed their appreciation for *Flight* and the role it plays in the development of qualified staff. One family participant whose children attend a centre using *Flight* as a curriculum framework shared that "[It] has a really good system and the curriculum that they work with on a monthly basis because it's different stuff every month. I think they just do amazing. They're really good and I think they're more qualified than ever and I see them doing their training, they're hands-on. So it's nice to see that they're there, still going to work and still doing their training and knowing that they're doing that. I know that they're still on that level where they have to be for their level. And just knowing that even getting that more training, they're more qualified for their work."

An educator participant sought the opportunity at the end of the Focus Group to emphasize the importance of *Flight* in the development of practices that reflect the principles of the curriculum framework. "We didn't talk about *Flight* and I think that makes you so reflective as a centre. And so if you have a common language and we also didn't talk about anything like planning wise, because I

think that is really important too. This year we've been doing a really different approach to planning with writing things on these huge pieces of paper and making giant visuals of them and making research questions as teams. And I think that we've come so far in our centre's culture of inquiry and everything that has changed the aspect of things so much this year."

The emphasis on a culture of inquiry through engagement with *Flight* was reflected numerous times by other educator participants, who sought the opportunity to express their desire to grow within their position of educator (Makovichuk et al., 2014). "I think an educator needs to be reflective, open to multiple perspectives and critical reflection... I think they need to be open to diverse co-educators and children. I also think they need to be playful to be willing to get on the floor with children, get messy and right into the play."

## Discussion

Across all five focus groups, the notion of *a practice of relationships* was threaded through responses to questions from both educators as well as families. As *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* describes, engaging in a practice of relationships necessitates that educators seek out, appreciate, and nurture relationships with children, families, as well as the broader community (Makovichuk et al., 2014). Paramount in a practice of relationships is a keen interest to be open, reflective, and constantly driven to actively learn more about families as well as the profession of child care in general. Such dispositions are also explored in *Flight*, describing dispositions to learn such as "I/we are participating" (relating to listening to others and sharing ideas) and "I/we are seeking" (relating to questioning and learning more) (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 60).

Educators seeking a practice of relationships with families deliberately cultivate meaningful participation and active engagement from families in the decisions regarding the care of their children. This is a vital approach that also reflects the childcare based recommendations in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's findings and call to action (TRC, 2015; Taylor, 2017). According to Ball (2014), "policies that ensure access by [Indigenous] children to high quality, culturally appropriate early learning and child care can support children and families to achieve better outcomes" (p. 18).

In working toward reconciliation, a practice of relationships that encourages meaningful participation and active engagement also reflects the values of families in the environment in which children learn and grow. It is important for educators to honour family voice and choice in their definition and personal explorations of cultures. When a centre collaboratively engages to understand the knowledge and teachings that are relevant for each child and family, educators reflect a strong image

of the family as well as validate truths and varying ways of knowing and being, thus deepening their practice of relationships and moving closer toward reconciliation (Taylor, 2017).

## Next Steps

Immediately, additional research will be done to learn how the ideas discussed in this document are being implemented in child care centres, especially in light of the barriers families face as described by participants in this study. To that end, focus group participants were asked to identify child care centres that have demonstrated aspects of quality childcare and educator dispositions, and that have implemented measures to meet the needs of Indigenous children and families. Specifically, participants were asked the following question:

Have you had good experiences [working] at a child care centre in Edmonton? If so, could you please share the names of the child care centre(s) with us so that we can learn from them?

The final phase of this project will be to conduct case studies for two of these identified sites. Centres were recommended by families that align with aspects of the qualities provided by families, and/or centres where families currently attend. In this way, case studies will reflect the notions of quality as defined by Indigenous parents, rather than the assumptions of the researchers.

Overall, information from these focus groups emphasizes the potential of the role of *Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework* in educators' practice of relationships with Indigenous children and families (Makovichuk et al., 2014). Given the emphasis placed on *Flight* by several educator participants in the focus groups, it is reasonable to recommend that in-service educators continue to receive support in their understanding of and engagement with this framework. Additionally, given the limited voice of Indigenous families in this focus group process, future research should be conducted to explore additional experiences of Indigenous families with child care in Edmonton.

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## Notes from Focus Groups

### MacEwan University Land Acknowledgment:

We acknowledge that the land on which we gather in Treaty Six Territory is the traditional gathering place for many Indigenous people. We honour and respect the history, languages, ceremonies and culture of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit who call this territory home.

The First People's connection to the land teaches us about our inherent responsibility to protect and respect Mother Earth. With this acknowledgement, we honour the ancestors and children who have been buried here, missing and murdered Indigenous women and men, and the process of ongoing collective healing for all human beings. We are reminded that we are all treaty people and of the responsibility we have to one another.

### Indigenous Families Focus Group Questions

#### General - Access and Choice

	How did you find out about your child care centre?
2	Why did you choose your child care centre for your children? (Bowes, Kitson, Simpson, Reid, Smith, Downey & Pearce, 2011)

#### Culture

We want to start by talking about your families' culture and your child care centre.	
3	How much knowledge do you think educators working with your children have about your home/community culture? (Endfield, 2007)
4	How have you personally shared aspects of your culture/community with the child care program? (Ball, 2012; Dockett, Mason & Perry, 2006)
5	How do you see your culture/community in the child care program? (Hare, 2011; Bowes, Kitson et al., 2011)
6	Are there any direct connections to your community, such as an Elder, involved in the childcare program your child attends? (Greenwood & Shawana, 2003; Sims, Saggars, & Frances, 2012)

#### Curriculum/Programming

We now want to talk about your thoughts on children's learning in child care	
7	What aspects of the child care program are working well for you and your child (such as what children are learning, activities, how programs communicate with

	you about what is happening, supporting your child's specific needs, etc.)? (Sims, Saggars, & Frances, 2012)
8	What kinds of expectations do you have for the child care program? (Martin, 2017)
9	Is your child exposed to any Indigenous language learning in child care? (Binesi, 2018)

### Relationships

We now want to talk about your relationship with educators	
10	How do educators involve you in the day to day experiences of your child in the program? (Bang, Nolan, & McDauid-Morgan, 2018)
11	How has the child care program and/or educators worked to build relationships with you? (Lampert, Burnett, Martin, & McCrea, 2014)
12	How much do you trust educators working with your child? (Trudgett & Grace, 2011)

### General - Child Care Quality

We want to learn more about what you think makes a good child care centre	
13	When you think of an early childhood educator, what kind of personal qualities are important to you?
14	What do you hope your child experiences while in a child care centre? (Kemble, 2019)
15	Are there any factors that make it challenging for your child to attend child care? (Milligan, 2007)
16	Is there anything that we did not talk about today that you think makes a good child centre? (Bowes, Kitson, Simpson, Reid, Smith, Downey & Pearce, 2011)
17	Have you had good experiences at a child care centre in Edmonton? If so, could you please share the names of the child care centre(s) with us so that we can learn from them?

## Indigenous Focus Group - Educator Questions

### General

1	Why did you choose your child care centre for work?
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### Culture

We want to start by talking about culture and your child care centre

2	How much knowledge do you have regarding the home/community culture of the children you work with? (Endfield, 2007)
3	How have you children and families share aspects of their culture/community with the child care program? (Ball, 2012; Dockett, Mason & Perry, 2006)
4	How do you see culture/community in the child care program? (Hare, 2011; Bowes, Kitson et al., 2011)
5	Are there any direct connections to Indigenous communities, such as an Elder, involved in the childcare program? (Greenwood & Shawana, 2003; Sims, Saggars, & Frances, 2012)

### Curriculum/Programming

We now want to talk about your thoughts on children's learning in child care

6	What aspects of the child care program do you think are working well for children and families (such as what children are learning, activities, how programs communicate about what is happening, supporting children's specific needs, etc.)? (Sims, Saggars, & Frances, 2012)
6	What kinds of expectations do you think families have for the child care program? (Martin, 2017)
7	Are children exposed to any Indigenous language learning in child care? (Binesi, 2018)

### General - Quality Child Care

We want to learn more about what you think makes a good child care centre

10	What kind of personal qualities do you think are important for families in relation to the early childhood educator?
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11	What do you hope children experience while in a child care centre? (Kemble, 2019)
12	What kind of factors make it challenging for children and families to attend child care? (Milligan, 2007)
13	Is there anything that we did not talk about today that you think makes a good child centre? (Bowes, Kitson, Simpson, Reid, Smith, Downey & Pearce, 2011)
14	Have you had good experiences working at a child care centre in Edmonton? If so, could you please share the names of the child care centre(s) with us so that we can learn from them?