

Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools







Introduction

It is essential that early learning and child care programs demonstrate quality and foster social, emotional, physical and cognitive development of children.

Developmentally appropriate early learning and child care practice is child-centred, reflects family and community contexts and encourages meaningful partnerships between each child, his or her family and early learning and child care staff.

Manitoba is committed to supporting quality in early learning and child care (ELCC) programs. A key component is *Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools*. This curriculum framework supports staff at preschool centres and nursery schools to develop, describe and enhance their curriculum. This framework helps staff design play-based, developmentally appropriate interactions, relationships, environments and experiences to allow all children to develop to their fullest potential.

Early Returns is based on current research and best practices. It will help you develop your curriculum and write a statement that describes it. This information can enhance the quality of your program as you:

- think about what you do in practice
- explain the reasons for this practice
- evaluate and enhance your curriculum



What is early learning and child care curriculum?

In early learning and child care (ELCC), curriculum refers to how you organize opportunities for children to learn throughout the day. This is based on goals for children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. Staff should understand and respond to the abilities, interests and needs of each child.

ELCC curriculum is not a list of topics that need to be taught or activities that have to be completed. It is the way you design interactions, relationships, environments and experiences to create learning opportunities. It describes your intention to support children's learning and development.

Young children learn best through play throughout the day and not just at set times for staff-directed learning experiences. Your curriculum guides your decisions about specific interactions, relationships, environments and experiences that will benefit children the most.

Children learn throughout the day. Learning and care are inseparable. Your curriculum incorporates learning that occurs during free play, routines and other daily activities. Children learn to socialize during mealtime conversations. They learn self-help skills such as putting on snow pants after the first snowfall. They learn to get along with others when they discuss and come up with a plan to share a favourite toy. Their language and physical development are fostered during group times such as singing and movement games. Implementation of your curriculum begins the moment the first staff member arrives each morning to set up the environment. It lasts until all children have left at the end of the day.

The practices you use to implement your curriculum are based on your knowledge and beliefs about how children

learn and develop. Appropriate practices reflect your understanding of current research and theory in early childhood development. For instance, because you know that children use objects to represent familiar items, you support them when they use toys and play materials in different ways. To support a child who creates cookies out of play dough, you can encourage him or her to take them to the stove in the daily living area to bake. By supporting and extending the child's ideas during play, you create a more meaningful and relevant experience that enhances the child's learning and development.

It is important to use your skills as an observer and note-taker to identify children's knowledge and interests so you can determine related experiences that will support their learning and development. For example, respond to children's fascination with a nearby construction site by adding a variety of cardboard tubes and boxes to the block area so they can experiment with building structures. Keep a flexible schedule to support children engrossed in play rather than interrupting them during these valuable learning opportunities. When your practices reflect your understanding of current theory and research, you implement curriculum in a way that develops and evolves with the children.

Quality early learning and child care does not happen by accident. Positive results in high quality programs happen when curriculum is planned, specified and integrated (Bowman, Donovan and Burns, 2000). When you know, understand and value your curriculum and how to implement it, you arrange and plan interactions, relationships, environments and experiences with intention and purpose. This results in positive outcomes for children.

Curriculum is a key dimension of high quality child care. It is what elevates activities from simple time-fillers to stimulating learning experiences that enhance children's healthy development.

(Canadian Child Care Federation, 2005)





There is encouraging evidence that good nutrition, nurturing and responsive caregiving in the first years of life, linked with good early child development programs, improve the outcomes for all children's learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health throughout life.

(McCain and Mustard, 1999)

How curriculum has been defined and explained by experts:

Curriculum, in early child development, includes both the care and the learning that occur when the child participates in an early child development setting. It is everything that is part of a child's day or hours spent in a home- or centre-based program. Curriculum includes daily schedules and routines, the physical environment, play materials, learning experiences, and, most importantly, the people who are part of the early child development setting.

(Gestwicki and Bertrand, 2003)

A curriculum is a system of intentions and plans to promote development and learning that is based on an educational philosophy and a theoretical approach that is consistent with the values associated with the philosophy.

(Shiple, 2008)

Curriculum: the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, that occur within an environment designed to foster children's learning and development.

(New Zealand Ministry of Education)

...a curriculum is not information or activities, it is a plan for learning, and therefore the learning has to be accessible. After all, the important thing is not whether a particular activity or piece of material... is accessible; the important thing is whether the learning for which the material or activity is designed is accessible. That is its purpose in a curriculum.

(Hitchcock, Meyer, Rose and Jackson, 2002)

Curriculum is more than a collection of enjoyable activities. Curriculum is a complex idea containing multiple components, such as goals, content, pedagogy, or instructional practices. Curriculum is influenced by many factors, including society's values, content standards, accountability systems, research findings, community expectations, culture and language, and individual children's characteristics.

(National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2003)



The foundation of early learning and child care curriculum

The child and child development

Recent research on brain development shows the importance of the early years. Quality experiences in children's early years are critical for further social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.

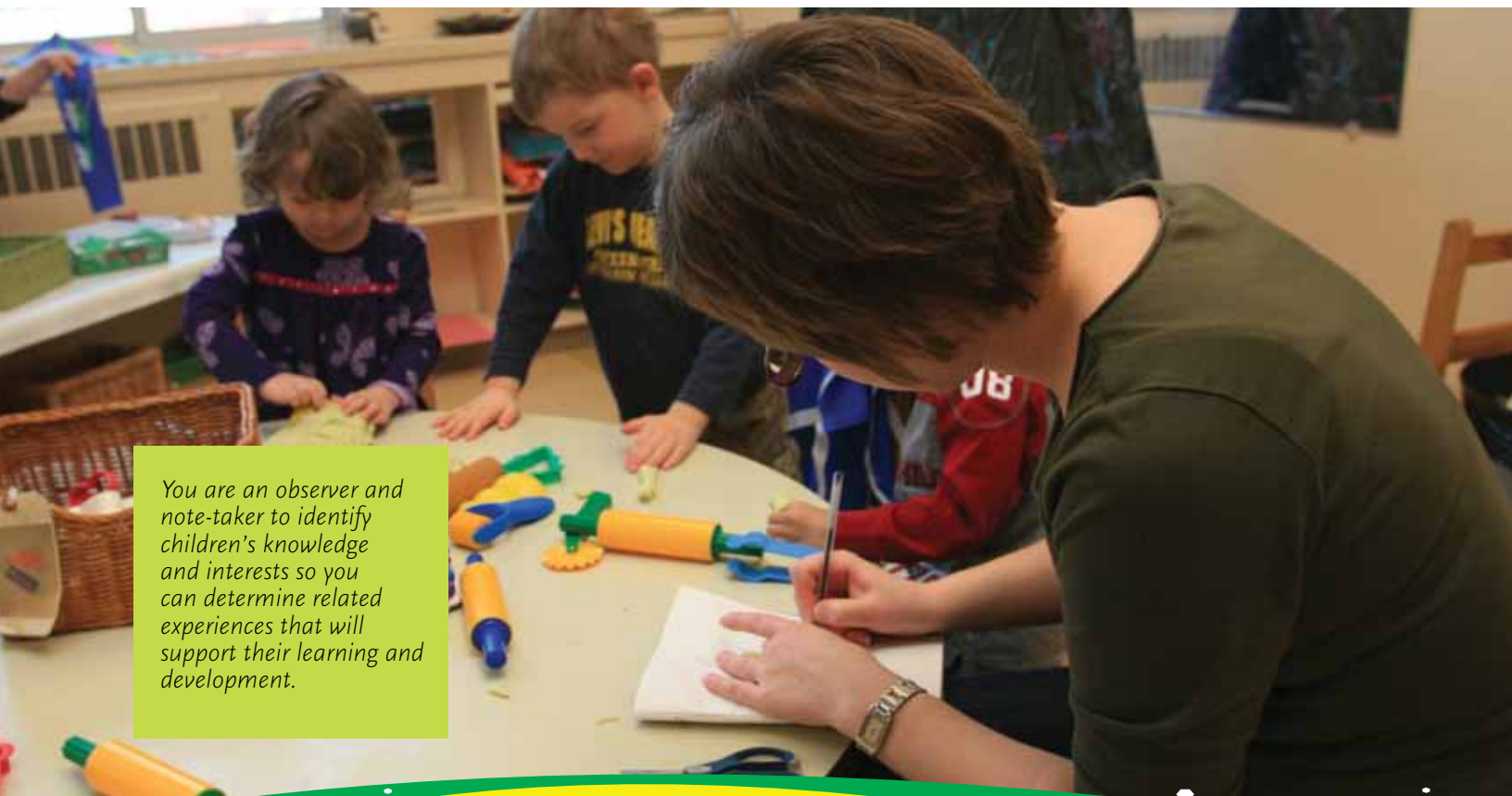
To provide quality experiences, knowledge of child development is essential but knowledge of each individual child is also required to make decisions about curriculum.

Curriculum guides how you arrange and plan interactions, relationships, environments and experiences for children. These decisions are based on your intention to support each child's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. You must actively take time to understand each of the children in your care by observing, interacting, listening, note-taking and

reflecting. For example:

- What do you know about this child?
- What has this child experienced?
- What does this child already know?
- What might this child be ready for and interested in next?

Your curriculum must provide a balance of opportunities to support all areas of children's development, as well as the interests, abilities and needs of each child. For instance, to support children's social and emotional development, you must encourage them to feel good about themselves, be independent and work with other children. To enhance children's cognitive development, you must challenge them to experiment, think critically, communicate, self-regulate and solve problems. To support the



You are an observer and note-taker to identify children's knowledge and interests so you can determine related experiences that will support their learning and development.

Child care programs can best prepare children for school entry by assisting them to develop the personality characteristics and the social, self-regulatory and communication skills required for successful transition into school and by providing opportunities for hands-on exploration under the guidance of adults who understand child development.

(Doherty, 2005)



interests, abilities and needs of each child, you must encourage children to make choices from a wide variety of experiences that are inspired by play and designed to extend children's prior knowledge. To support children's physical development, you must encourage them to be active and use their large and fine motor skills.

Curriculum for young children must be designed for the children's current developmental level, not for the future level expected at the time of school entry. Your curriculum must provide opportunities for children to develop the preceding concepts and skills that are needed for success in school. For example, to hold a pencil with control in kindergarten, preschool children need many opportunities to practice their fine motor skills by manipulating small objects such as paint brushes, scissors, building blocks and play dough during play times. Learning is most effective when it extends from children's abilities and experiences. For instance, once a child has mastered using scissors to cut paper, provide other materials such as cardboard or cloth for cutting.

Your curriculum and its implementation should be based on current child development theory and research and must be appropriate for the developmental levels and abilities of the children in your program. Developmentally appropriate practice is based on what you know about child development, the individual children in your program and their families and community environments. This helps you make informed decisions about play, interactions, relationships, environments and experiences that are the most suitable for each child. Your role is to extend children's thinking and learning by skilfully asking questions, making suggestions or providing materials that can extend children's play and provide more learning opportunities. This is an essential role in any curriculum.

...the child's capacity to learn when she enters school is strongly influenced by the neural wiring that takes place in the early years of life.

(McCain, Mustard and Shanker, 2007)

Learning through Play

Research shows that children learn best through play. This is why curriculum for young children should be based on play.

Play is enjoyed by the children involved. Despite its fun nature, play cannot be considered a frivolous waste of time, or an activity to be put aside for children to focus on real learning. Play has intrinsic value far beyond a way to fill time. Play provides unlimited possibilities for learning and development.

Consider how you will ensure that each and every child has ample time each day for uninterrupted free play. Large blocks of free play time (at least 45 to 60 minutes at one time) throughout the day are essential for children to become fully engaged in meaningful experiences. For example, children:

- learn about sinking and floating while experimenting at the water table
- develop an understanding of balance while building with blocks
- enhance strength and co-ordination while running or kicking a ball
- develop social skills such as sharing and taking turns during dramatic play in the daily living centre

Giving children opportunities to choose and direct their play experiences empowers children to take the lead in their own learning.

Children want to participate in self-directed play. They have control of their experience and create their own knowledge. This means that children should be able to

decide where, when and how to play, and their play often has an element of pretend or imagination. Children should be in charge of the play, and therefore the learning that goes along with it.

“When it is self-directed, play leads to feelings of competence and self-confidence.” (Hewes, 2006)

Other skills and concepts children learn through unstructured, open-ended play of their own design include:

- social skills and relationship building
- negotiation, conflict resolution and problem-solving
- empathy and self-regulation
- independence and safe risk-taking
- leadership
- communication skills
- organizational skills
- imagination and creativity

Play nourishes every aspect of children's development. It forms the foundation of intellectual, social, physical and emotional skills necessary for success in school and in life.

(Hewes, 2006)

Play is often defined as activity done for its own sake, characterized by:

- **Means rather than ends**

The process is more important than any end point or goal.

- **Flexibility**

Objects are put in new combinations or roles are acted out in new ways.

- **Positive affect**

Children often smile, laugh, and say they enjoy it.

(Smith and Pellegrini, 2008)

The child-centred approach to curriculum is focused on meeting the needs of each child, and built around the idea that children create their own knowledge and learn through active involvement in play. As children grow and develop, play changes, so their interactions, relationships, environments and experiences must evolve with them. Observe children during play. Watch for play experiences that engage other children and transform the children's space and materials. Write notes and reflect on what you see and hear to discover children's interests and abilities, and share these notes with co-workers.

Opportunities to learn through play should be based on children's interests, abilities and needs. These opportunities must build on children's existing knowledge and should be challenging but within reach. Provide meaningful play opportunities to enhance children's learning and development with experiences that are relevant to the children.

Your role is to extend children's play and provide play-based experiences to help them grow, learn and develop. To learn more about the children's play, you can join in. Use your senses to explore the materials. Listen to

the children's conversations and make comments that deepen the children's thinking. Be flexible to extend children's previous experiences and incorporate their interests. This will personalize each child's experience in your program. To implement curriculum in a flexible and personalized way, you must see all children as individuals who:

- are competent, curious, motivated learners
- are active and social learners
- bring previous knowledge and experiences
- begin to make sense of their world from the moment they are born
- come to your program influenced by family, gender, culture and previous experiences
- have a variety of learning styles and ways of understanding and constructing knowledge.

(Jacobs, Vukelich, and Howe, 2007)

In a truly enriched and challenging environment created for and with the children, free play means extended opportunities for children to guide and direct their own play, and presumably their own learning... While there is certainly room for some structured activities in the classroom and for teacher scaffolding and guidance, we must not lose sight of the meaning and importance of free play for children.

(Howe in Tremblay, Barr, Peters and Boivin, 2009)



The importance of play

Play:

- expands intelligence
- is a testing ground for language and reasoning connecting to the challenges children face in school, such as literacy, math, and science concepts
- stimulates the imagination, encouraging creative problem solving
- helps develop confidence, self-esteem, a sense of strengths and weaknesses, and a positive attitude toward learning
- is a significant factor in brain and muscle development

(McCain, Mustard, and Shanker, 2007)

Play:

- *is pleasurable and enjoyable*
- *has no extrinsic goals*
- *is spontaneous*
- *involves active engagement*
- *is generally engrossing*
- *often has a private reality*
- *is non-literal*
- *can contain a certain element of make-believe*

(Hirsh-Pasek K, Golinkoff RM. 2008)

Diversity

Diversity refers to the range of similarities and differences among children, staff and families in your program and community. It includes race, culture, abilities, gender and age. Recognizing and respecting diversity is very important to early learning and child care experiences. It enhances each child's social and emotional well-being and promotes caring, co-operative and equitable interactions with others (Derman-Sparks, Ramsey and Edwards, 2006).

Each child must feel a sense of belonging and feel positive about his or her own self identity. To acknowledge and learn more about diversity, you show respect towards the uniqueness of each child, his or her family, the staff and community. Self-esteem, confidence and emotional development are strengthened when children and families feel accepted and supported.

It is also important that children understand that everyone in their program and community is unique. Providing opportunities for children to explore similarities and differences in a positive atmosphere supports respect for diversity. For children to respect one another and appreciate individuality, you must actively encourage participation of all children in a setting that reflects their family and culture.



Inclusion

Inclusion means children of all abilities have equal access to participate in early learning and child care programs. When children are together as part of the group, each child's development is enhanced and positive social attitudes are created. Through inclusive practices, you help children with additional support needs to be active participants in the curriculum you offer. This will mean creating or adapting certain activities or using new strategies to meet each child's needs. (Irwin, Lero and Brophy, 2000).

Children with additional support needs have goals developed in an individual program plan (IPP). All staff should be aware of these goals and actively incorporate them into your curriculum.

High quality programs respond to the individual interests, abilities and needs of each child. Inclusion is more than the presence of a child with additional support needs. Genuine inclusion ensures active and meaningful participation by every child in the daily program and with one another. How this occurs will be different for each child based on his or her individual abilities and needs. All children should be valued, have friends and feel that they belong.

All children should be supported so they can meaningfully participate in your curriculum.

All children should feel a sense of belonging by being accepted and respected for their individuality.

Incorporating Inclusion and Diversity into the Curriculum

Providing opportunities for children to recognize themselves and respect others is essential in ELCC curriculum. When children are exposed to diversity and inclusion at an early age, they accept others more easily. You can do this by providing children with a variety of materials, such as play food, toy people, dress up clothes, photos and books that represent Manitoba's diverse population. Have staff work with all children in the group and try to avoid one-on-one child to staff assignment whenever possible. Use American Sign Language to greet a family with a child who is deaf; ensure all children have an opportunity to share during group time; or serve foods that reflect the cultural diversity of the families in your program and community. Incorporating diversity and inclusion benefits children, families and staff because it helps develop a sense of belonging and strengthens understanding and acceptance of differences so everyone can learn from each other.



Components of early learning and child care (ELCC) curriculum

Manitoba's ELCC Curriculum Framework is divided into:

- interactions and relationships
- environments
- planned and spontaneous experiences

Curriculum components in preschool centres and nursery schools are based on learning through play. These support child development and incorporate meaningful diversity and inclusion.

Children thrive in child care settings...where adults interact with children in a warm, sensitive, responsive manner, the environment is physically and emotionally safe and language-rich, and there are activities that promote prosocial interaction, creativity, exploration and problem-solving.

(Doherty, 2005)





Becoming aware of the purpose for the talk you are engaged in with children is the first step in developing a deeper understanding of the role of conversation in learning.

(Burman, 2009)

Interactions and Relationships

Interactions allow genuine relationships to develop and will help you understand the children and adults you work with. These relationships also help both children and adults feel comfortable to share their own interests, successes and challenges with you. Relationships between families and staff, adults and children, and children and their peers are built with frequent positive interactions based on respect and open communication.

Consider how you can use conversations with children and their families to build meaningful relationships. For instance, when you ask a child about swimming lessons or a new pet, you are showing interest in their lives outside of the child care setting. You are modelling social skills while you build a caring relationship between you and the child and between you and the child's family. Learn family member's names. Share events of the day. When children arrive, try to greet each parent and child, address them by name, smile and ask questions about their time at home. At the end of the day, again greet each parent and share a positive story about his or her child's day. This will not only give you opportunities to develop relationships with

children and families, it will also give you opportunities to share the learning and development that takes place for the children each day.

For children to learn and develop, they must feel safe and secure by developing a sense of trust in everyone who cares for them. Consider how using positive language and logical reasoning when guiding behaviour impacts your ability to foster a positive relationship with children. Children learn through the mentoring, scaffolding and responsive care you provide. You must be observant and interact appropriately in children's play and daily experiences. When praising, encouraging, or giving feedback to children, be specific and descriptive. For example, say, "You look so proud of yourself. You worked together to find a solution so you could both have a turn to use the truck," rather than just, "Good job." Interact to support children's learning and development. For example, you help children be successful by encouraging them to make a meaningful choice between play areas, rather than directing children to "find a place to play".

Group play and other social interactions provide meaningful support to children as they explore and gain new skills and knowledge. Think about how you can use positive interactions to foster growth, independence and learning while you play with children. Children learn to self-regulate and respect the comments, thoughts and opinions of others when they are taking turns in open discussion. For example, sit together and encourage children to talk about their thoughts and ideas during the mealtime routine. Asking the question, “What did you do last night?” will result in everyone taking a turn to share. Children also learn and develop empathy for others when they relate to other children, families and staff. Listen to what the children are telling you. Take time to wait, watch and listen after you have made a comment or asked a

Some comments and open-ended questions to stimulate children’s reasoning:

- Extend knowledge: “That orange flower is called a tiger lily.”
- Build vocabulary: “Your tower looks like a skyscraper.”
- Build creative thinking: “I wonder what we could use to build a roof for our fort.”
- Predict: “What will happen next?”
- Make decisions: “What do you think...?”
- Evaluate: “Which story is your favourite? Why?”
- Imagine: “What would it be like if...?”
- Transform: “How could we make muffins from all the ingredients?”
- Reason: “How did you decide those went together?”
- Compare: “Your baby is sleeping in her bed like you sleep on your cot.”
- Give information: “She is crying because she fell down and hurt her leg.”

(Sources: Weitzman, 1992 and Kostelnik et al, 2005)

question. Not only does this role model respect and understanding of others, it also provides you with insight to how the children are learning and developing.

By making comments and asking open-ended questions you stretch children’s thinking and understanding about themselves and about the world. Encourage children’s reasoning through comments and questions, such as: “I wonder what you can use to make it...” or, “What do you think...?” Conversations between adults and children and among children build skills such as problem solving and reveal children’s prior knowledge. The opportunities for positive interactions and relationships that you provide for children help them learn valuable social skills that are important to helping children get ready for school.

Ask yourself:

- How are our interactions with children more encouraging than directive?
- How do we get to know each child as an individual?
- How much time do I spend interacting with children during their play?
- How do we encourage children’s language skills?
- Do we balance our time so that all children have opportunities to interact with all the people who care for them?
- What types of open ended questions do we ask children?
- What types of comments do we make to encourage reasoning?
- How do we listen to the children?
- How do we encourage socialization with peers and adults?
- How do we arrange our space, materials, schedule and transitions in order to encourage interactions?
- How do we initiate and support relationships with each child and his or her family?
- How do we communicate with families about their child’s experiences and learning?
- What would a visitor see the children doing during most of the day?
- What relationships do we have with our community?



Art is self-expression; where no two works look the same. Providing open-ended art, instead of colouring sheets or pre-cut shapes such as pumpkins or leaves to decorate will encourage creativity and self-esteem.

Environments

Children need environments that support exploration and interaction both indoors and outdoors. They need adequate space, appropriate materials and sufficient time to play. This means that you need to arrange play areas, materials, schedules and transitions carefully to stimulate and sustain children's play.

You must provide children with a variety of play choices including dramatic; fine motor; large muscle; block and construction; science, water and sand; and opportunities to explore music, art, literacy and numeracy. Consider how room arrangement, design and layout provide opportunities for different group sizes, abilities and needs and types of play. For instance, your cozy area provides a more intimate space for one or two children to play alone or quietly together, while the large muscle area encourages activity, physical play and movement.

You must consider each child's abilities, interests and needs when setting up an encouraging environment. Play areas and materials need to be visible and accessible so that all children are able to become independent explorers. For children to feel safe and secure, their environment must be organized and familiar so children can find what they need when they need it. To help children feel they belong, include families in the environment. For example, you can put photos of each child's family on top of shelves in the dramatic play area or in lockers. Provide an environment where children are offered play choices based on their individual interests. Reflect on your documentation of children's play when you are setting up the learning environment each day. Prepare a variety of materials ahead of time and set them out to invite children to play.



Staff arrange space and materials to foster peer interactions and create a community where all children are included.

We have found many advantages to eliminating transitions and providing extended periods of play in a daily schedule...There is more time for the teachers to observe and deepen their understanding of the developmental levels and needs of each individual child in their care.

(Gallick and Lee, 2010)

The daily schedule

Have staff write out their daily schedules for children. Pass out sheets of coloured sticky dots and ask them to put a green dot beside everything on the schedule that is child-initiated, designed, or directed. Put blue dots beside the times that represent holding patterns – transitions which involve changing, ending, or waiting. Wherever there are teacher directed or dictated times, add a red dot. When you're done, discuss what you discover.

- Any surprises?
- Whose needs are reflected in the blue and red dots?
- Are you satisfied with the general quality of how the day is designed to meet children's needs?

(Carter, 1996)



This area was set up by the morning staff before the children arrived. She read in the communication book the children were playing turkey dinner in this area at the end of the previous day.

Open ended play materials enable young children to use them in many different ways. Providing open-ended art materials for children to use, instead of pre-cut shapes such as pumpkins or leaves to decorate, will encourage creativity and self esteem while developing fine motor skills. For instance, provide loose parts that allow children to focus on the process of exploring and using materials, rather than the end product that can be created. This encourages individual expression, so that each child's work becomes his or her own unique creation. Play materials and displays should respectfully reflect diversity and inclusion in a positive way. You should also use the environment to thoughtfully display children's stories, artwork, photos and projects. Ensure that you provide time within your daily schedule for children to revisit experiences and reflect on what they have learned.

Consider how your schedule and transitions throughout the day impact children's learning and development. Your schedule should provide at least 45 to 60 minutes of uninterrupted free play time once all children have arrived. You can extend this play by providing optional activities for children to join such as additional props in dramatic play or group time when the children are ready for it. Provide this type of schedule throughout your day to maximize learning opportunities.

Consistent, interesting and well-planned transitions between long periods of free play support children to feel secure and learn what comes next during their day. To determine whether a transition is needed, consider the energy level of children in play as well as their physical needs. If most children are involved in complex group play with each other, consider delaying the transition to give children time to think about and act on their play ideas.

When a transition is necessary, support children's ability to change activities by using small groups, minimizing waiting times, and preparing the next activity ahead of time. It is important to examine your daily schedule and transitions regularly to determine whether they meet the needs of the children who participate in your curriculum.

You should strive to make the environment a place where children want to be – where they are comfortable and feel they belong. Indoor settings should be cozy and home-like and outdoor surroundings should connect and engage children with nature. Your daily schedule and transition times should be thoughtfully planned and implemented to support children's play, learning and development.

Ask yourself:

- How much time is provided each day for children to play without interruption?
- In full time programs, is uninterrupted free play provided for all children in both the morning and afternoon?
- How is the schedule adjusted for the needs of individual children?
- Are transitions in the daily schedule kept to a minimum in length and amount? Why?
- How do we arrange our indoor and outdoor space and materials? Why?
- How do we ensure all children can use all areas?
- What space is available for individual children? Pairs? Small groups? Large groups?
- What relaxing and private areas are provided? What items are available there? Why?
- How do materials support the various stages of play?
- How are materials adapted for the needs of individual children?
- Where do children see their family in the environment?
- How does the environment reflect the diversity of our children, families and community?



Preparing a stimulating environment that fosters play and exploration is an essential part of the work of a teacher of preschool children.

(Fraser, 2006)



If you are feeling uncomfortable or frustrated during transition times, that is a sign that your current schedule may need to be revised to better meet the needs and developmental levels of the children in your care.

(Gallick and Lee, 2010)



Planned and spontaneous experiences

A child-centred curriculum includes a combination of child-initiated spontaneous play and planned activities designed around children's interests and needs. You need to provide both planned and spontaneous experiences to support children's learning and development. Either type of experience can happen indoors or outdoors at any time throughout the day. Your role as an educator during all experiences is to focus on helping the children build their knowledge, rather than on instructing children.

Planned experiences are thought out and prepared beforehand. For instance, you could prepare orange, red, yellow and brown paint for the art easel after children have commented on the changing colours of the leaves during outdoor play. Another example is providing baby dolls in the daily living centre knowing that a child has become a big brother or sister.

Spontaneous experiences are unexpected events that capture children's interest. They provide a teachable moment to enhance children's learning and development. Examples include meeting a person who uses a cane while on a neighbourhood walk and then talking about it; or noticing seeds planted by the children have sprouted and then allowing time for the children to observe and discuss.

Experiences you provide must encourage children to explore; experiment; think critically; and solve problems. By asking open ended questions, you allow children the opportunity to discuss what they understand. When you make thought-provoking comments and ask wonder questions, you will find out what children know and how to help them gain more understanding. Use teachable moments and plan experiences to encourage learning and development for each individual child.

Observe and document children's play to identify and expand the curiosity of each child and create a learning opportunity. When you observe and interact with children during play, you can pay specific attention to their actions and reflect on what you see and hear to determine the children's interests and prior knowledge.



Celebrate childhood. Be in the moment with children. And reflect on how you are learning and growing because you can observe children and learn from them.

(Gronlund and James, 2005)

Identify elements of the specific play experience that you are observing from the child's perspective. For instance, during free play, consider what skills and concepts the children are practicing. Observe for the purpose of curriculum planning – focus on ordinary moments of children's play in all parts of the day. The notes that you take when observing children should be short and recorded in the moment or as soon as possible afterwards. This way you quickly and accurately record the moments that are used as the basis for your child-centred curriculum.

Consider using these questions to identify the interests, abilities and needs of each child during play:

- Specifically, what do you see the children doing? What do you hear them saying?
- What open-ended question or comment will you make to stimulate reasoning?
- Wait for the children's response. What was the response?
- What does this tell you about the children? What could be the developmental need or interest? Share your ideas and discuss with co-workers.
- What do the children need from me? What materials can I add to the environment? What interactions or experiences can I provide? Do routines or transitions need to be changed to build on developmental needs?

Share your documented observations and ideas with co-workers to determine areas of interest for children. Use your knowledge of child development, individual children and their curiosity to plan a variety of related experiences that expand on the children's ideas. By planning based on their interests, your curriculum will be personalized as it will relate to the specific and changing needs and abilities of children in your program. Because child-centred curriculum is based on interactions between you and the children, children are involved in planning and have the opportunity to take the lead in their individual learning.

Children must be offered a choice of experiences that will enhance their physical, social, emotional and cognitive development in a variety of ways. Children need opportunities to express themselves creatively, artistically and musically, as well as to build confidence and self esteem. Each experience that you provide gives you an opportunity to further observe children's learning, and then plan for another related activity to expand play to enhance learning and development. When using this process to plan curriculum, you can provide child-centred, meaningful and relevant learning opportunities with each child in your care throughout each day.

It is important to communicate with parents about their child's learning, including the interests, abilities and needs you have observed during the children's play. Documenting the curriculum you provide can foster a stronger relationship between you and the families of the children in your care and show the learning and development that takes place for each child every day. Photos, notes, samples of children's work and video or audio clips are examples of documentation that you can use in order to show families, community members and visitors how children learn and develop through your play-based curriculum. Clear documentation gives parents the opportunity to see and understand how you are promoting their child's learning and development through the purposeful interactions, relationships, environments and experiences that you provide.

Ask yourself:

- What is our role during children's play experiences?
- How do we encourage children's language skills during play?
- How do we determine each child's interests?
- How do we build on and support children's interests?
- How do we keep track of each child's abilities, interests and needs? How do we incorporate these into the experiences we provide?
- How do we build on children's prior knowledge and experiences to provoke new understandings?
- How do we incorporate Individual Program Plan (IPP) goals into the experiences we provide?
- How is each child encouraged to interpret experiences in his or her own way?
- How is each child encouraged to express his or her own creativity and imagination?
- How do we encourage children to ponder and reflect on their experiences?
- How are typical routines of the day used as learning experiences?
- What opportunities are available for families to be involved in planning and evaluating experiences?
- Where and when do we provide documentation to show each child's learning and development?
- How do we use our community as a resource for planning experiences?

Circle time

Circle time is when the children come together to share the news of the day, read a story, sing, play rhythm instruments, assign jobs, or play a game. Circle time can introduce children to group listening and turn-taking skills, promote the development of language and social skills, and provide children with information about how their day will be structured.

Most three-year-olds and many four-year-olds are not developmentally ready to sit and listen to a group activity for longer than just a few minutes. Circle time activities that incorporate music and movement usually hold children's attention for longer periods of time than a sit-and-listen type of activity.

Although the traditional circle time includes all the children in the classroom, you might want to consider other options. For instance, make circle time an activity center and, like other play centers, give children the option of joining. Or run two circle times of eight children each instead of one large circle time of sixteen. Another option is to eliminate circle time completely until you feel the class is ready for this type of large group experience.

(Gould and Sullivan, 1999)

During circle time:

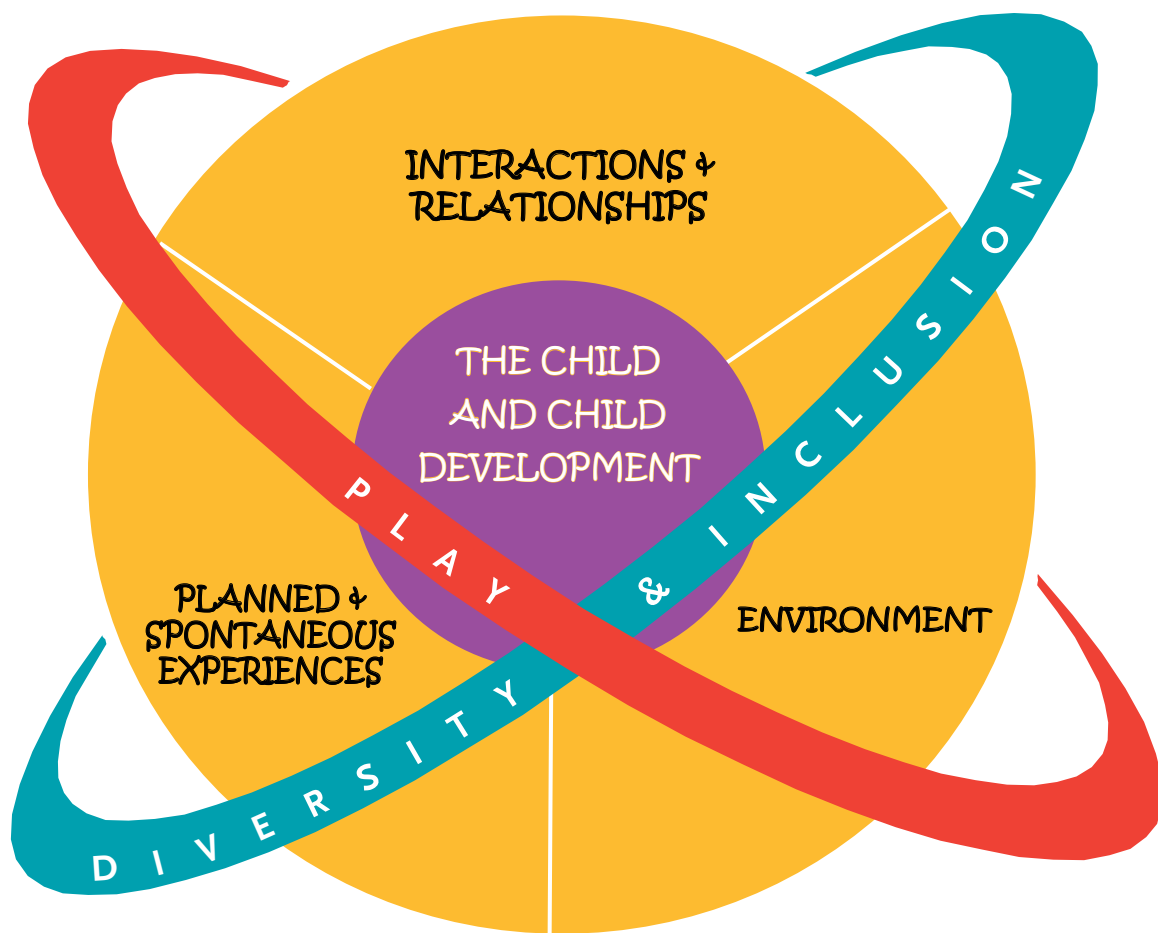
- What are the children doing and saying during circle time?
- Are they actively participating? If not, why do you think that is?
- What could you do differently to help children participate in this group experience?



The staff is sitting on the floor at the children's eye level and allowing children to sit in a way that is most comfortable for each of them. By keeping the group size small and using props, the staff ensures that each child is actively involved in the experience.

Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework

For Preschool Centres and
Nursery Schools



Your curriculum supports child development and is composed of interactions and relationships; environments; and planned and spontaneous experiences. Each of these components incorporates diversity and inclusion. Preschool centres and nursery schools provide curriculum that promotes children's play-based learning.



In a quality program, each child feels accepted, understood, supported and respected by the adults, enjoys positive relationships with the other children and generally find the activities interesting, engaging and satisfying.

(Canadian Child Care Foundation, 2007)

Developing an early learning and child care (ELCC) curriculum statement

Curriculum refers to how you organize learning opportunities for children throughout all parts of the day. This is based on goals for children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development while understanding abilities, interests and needs of each child. Your **curriculum statement** describes how you organize learning opportunities for children. Preschool curriculum is play-based and will be strongly influenced by your beliefs and values about how children learn and develop.

Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework provides information for you to develop, describe and enhance your unique play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum. It will help you determine the intention and purpose of interactions, relationships, environments and experiences that you provide to support children's learning and development.

A written curriculum statement is useful for staff orientation, program planning and evaluating your practices. It also helps parents understand your program and how you will support their children both individually and as part of the group. This gives you the opportunity to share how your program is unique and what takes place to foster the growth and development of all children.

Your curriculum statement should be based on your program's philosophy and reflect Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework. Pre-packaged curricula exist but a "recipe approach" with a predetermined set of activities that all children must participate in does not meet the needs of each individual child. Your curriculum should support and reflect the children, families and community that you serve.

Manitoba's preschool centres and nursery schools use many different types of curriculum approaches. Emergent Curriculum, Montessori, Reggio Emilia, themes and a mix of any of these are a few examples of curriculum approaches used. Regardless of your curriculum approach, you should use well thought out plans, systems, and processes – intention and purpose – for your curriculum. "Informal learning does not mean education is unplanned or haphazard." (Epstein, 2003, p. 46) All approaches to curriculum must include thoughtful planning to enhance children's learning and development.

Developing a clear curriculum statement helps you carry out intentional and purposeful interactions, relationships, environments and experiences to create meaningful and relevant learning opportunities for children. It also strengthens your accountability to children, parents, management and the public to provide play-based and developmentally appropriate curriculum. Consider the following scenario:

Staff at one centre previously planned curriculum based on pre-determined themes that were selected on a yearly basis. Staff found that this approach provided a clear organization into which they could incorporate a variety of planned activities in curriculum areas like science, music or art. However, staff were finding that children were not interested in their planned activities. Staff began observing the children's play and recording their conversations. In May, they discovered that rather than learning about "flowers" the children were more interested in machines because of the construction project across the street. Later that month they observed a great deal of dramatic play related to feeding babies and changing diapers. This wasn't surprising considering a number of the children had new babies at home. As the staff became more skilful in observing children's interests they were able to incorporate documentation and webbing to create a more personalized and flexible curriculum building on children's existing knowledge. Webbing became their primary tool to record children's interests and ideas, brainstorm and plan experiences. In February, who would have thought they would be exploring water? But when a child returned from a trip to Mexico with some seashells, the staff responded by providing magnifying glasses and scales. Before long the children were experimenting with sinking and floating in the water table. The staff now take photos and record children's comments and ideas, documenting the children's learning. The staff at this centre are well on their way to developing a new structure for curriculum planning.

Once you have reflected on the interactions, relationships, environments and experiences you provide, consider the following questions to evaluate your beliefs and practices in order to describe your curriculum:

How do we support children's learning and development?

- What do we do?
- How do we do it?
- How could others (such as parents or community members) see us doing this?

Deepen the thinking about your responses by asking yourself these questions:

- What do we know about how preschool children learn and develop?
- What do we know about how individual children in our program are learning and developing?
- How do we incorporate play throughout our program?
- How does our curriculum reflect our families and community?
- How do we coordinate and organize our program planning?
- What strategies, techniques and tools do we use to support program planning?
- How do we evaluate the effectiveness of our curriculum?

Tips

- Reflect on the importance of play-based learning for children's development.
- Reflect on the components of your curriculum: interactions and relationships, environments and planned and spontaneous experiences.
- Reflect on how you incorporate diversity and inclusion through your curriculum.
- Write what you actually do. Do not write what you wish to do. What you wish to do can become your goals.
- Be short and to the point. Use plain language, not jargon.
- Review your statement and ask yourself: **"What would I tell a parent or community member about our curriculum to help them understand how we organize learning opportunities for children?"**

Preparing children for school does not mean using an elementary school curriculum. Instead, to be school ready, preschool programs should provide learning opportunities to build preceding skills and concepts. This will let children get ready for the Kindergarten curriculum once they get there, rather than before they begin.

The attributes needed for success in kindergarten are primarily social skills, curiosity and a willingness to try new activities. These are all supported by play-based learning opportunities. Your curriculum statement can explain to parents how your program prepares preschool children for school in developmentally appropriate ways. It will support your knowledge and belief that a play-based curriculum is best for young children.

Once you have completed your curriculum statement, it is important to continue to review it regularly. Curriculum is always changing, depending on staff, children, families and the community. Reflect on and evaluate your curriculum statement once a year. This will keep the statement consistent with your practices while you continue to work toward providing quality early learning and child care.

Manitoba is committed to supporting quality programming in early learning and child care. Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework is an important way to support quality in preschool centres and nursery schools. It is your responsibility to provide interactions, relationships, environments and experiences that are developmentally appropriate and incorporate diversity and inclusion in a play-based curriculum.



The most relevant child attributes for success in kindergarten are social awareness and social skills such as friendship-making, self-regulation, knowing how to resolve conflicts with other children constructively, the ability to communicate needs, wants and thoughts verbally, and an enthusiastic approach to new activities.

(Doherty, 2005)



Internet Resources

Child Care Exchange – www.childcareexchange.com

Encyclopaedia on Early Childhood Development – www.child-encyclopedia.com

The Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development – www.excellence-earlychildhood.ca

Young Children (journal of the National Association for the Education of Young Children) – www.naeyc.org/yc

Canadian Child Care Federation – www.cccf-fcsge.ca

White Hutchinson Leisure & Learning Group – www.whitehutchinson.com/children

The Science of Early Child Development – www.scienceofecd.com

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Note: The resources marked with an asterisk (*) may be particularly helpful for staff to use in the process of developing their own curriculum.

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For more information on

Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework

call 945-0776 in Winnipeg;

or toll free 1-888-213-4754;

or visit manitoba.ca/childcare

