



2.1

The Image of the Child: A Mighty Learner and Citizen





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What does it mean to be a child?
How do we view children and childhood?

Every society, every culture, every family imagines children and childhood in its own way. These images are evident all around us—in family stories, in books, on TV, movies, digital and social media, as well as toys and advertisements, and within school and child care services, and government policies. Images of children and childhood are expressed in phrases like “boys will be boys,” “children are our future,” and “the innocence of childhood.” In early childhood communities, multiple images of the child may co-exist and create complexity for early learning and child care educators. Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework is intended to awaken the image of a strong, resourceful, capable child—a **mighty learner and citizen**.

Our own social, cultural, economic, and political perspective determines the image of the child, and for educators it is also informed by theories of learning. Current and historic theories of early learning view children in particular ways and influence our image of the child.¹

- **Developmental perspectives of learning** view children as developing in universal ages and stages toward maturity. This perspective is historically the foundation of early childhood education and views young children as active learners.
- **Socio-cultural perspectives of learning** view children not only as active, but also social learners within historical, social, cultural, economic, and political contexts that influence what children learn and how children learn. This socio-cultural perspective of learning understands the influences of each child’s family, social, and cultural practices and traditions in their learning.
- **Post-foundational perspectives of learning** examine issues of power, equity, equality, and fairness as critical influences on how and what children learn within relationship with others in the social, cultural, historical, economic, and political contexts of everyday living.²



Together these views and the images of the child that they produce are embedded, often unconsciously, in the early childhood environments we provide. These perspectives of learning evoke particular images of the child and our image of the child affects everything we do with children. It shapes our decision-making about daily routines and experiences of children’s care, play, learning, and development, as well as our interactions with each child and their **family**. The image of the child is evident in the materials we provide, our organization of time and space, our participation in children’s endeavours, and the relationships between educators, children, and their families.

Our image of the child affects everything we do with children.

The infant and preschool programs of Reggio Emilia, Italy, describe the image of the child as **rich, strong, capable, and competent**.³ Though many Canadian educators may support this image of a capable and knowing child, our colleagues in Reggio Emilia emphasize that countless common actions and interactions with young children are not always consistent with this image. For this reason, continuous re-examination of the image of the child is important to ensure that practice is aligned with this image.

Is an image of the child—a strong, resourceful, and capable learner and citizen—evident in your design of the care, play, and learning environment? Is this image of the child evident in your interactions with each child and his or her family?

Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework views the child as a mighty learner and citizen—strong, resourceful, and capable. This image affirms each child’s right to be listened to, to be treated with respect, and to participate in daily decisions that affect him or her.⁴ This understanding of each child as a citizen and as a strong, resourceful, and capable learner shifts the intention of our interactions from “doing to” a child toward “participating with” each child.⁵ This image of the child—a mighty learner and citizen—calls on us to continually re-examine our own practices, our interactions, and our assumptions about children, childhood, learning, and play.⁶

Each child’s learning unfolds in social, cultural, historical, economic, and political contexts and relationships of everyday life. Like adult views of children and childhood that are socially, culturally, economically, and politically constructed, so too are each child’s view of him- or herself socially, culturally, economically, and politically constructed.⁷ So if we—as educators—think of a child who resides in disadvantaged circumstances as the poor child who lacks resources, that child’s view of self is socially constructed by





us—whose image of the child is lacking. In contrast, if we acknowledge the resourcefulness of each child, regardless of economic or other social circumstance, then that child has the opportunity to see him- or herself as a strong, resourceful, and capable learner and citizen regardless of life circumstance. Our thoughts and actions are deeply connected and often convey hidden and powerful messages to children who are keen observers of the significant people in their lives.

How does your image of the child influence your interactions with children?

Following each narrative sample below is a description of how an educator might respond to a child in everyday experiences. Each response is considered using the perspectives of learning foundational to this curriculum framework. Not every situation is considered from all three perspectives: developmental, socio-cultural, and post-foundational. Some experiences lend themselves to particular perspectives of learning more than the others. Through these descriptions you can see how theories of learning reveal a particular image of the child; in turn, how our images of the child influences practice.

Held in one's arms, a tiny infant reduces a well-versed adult to babbling and cooing. As she grows, she discovers that when she drops a spoon from her perch in a highchair, a responsive adult willingly participates in her game of "Drop and Pick-Up" again... and again.

From a developmental perspective of learning, we notice this child's attention is drawn to an adult's cooing and is maintained through the adult-child eye gaze and smiles shared. This common early social interaction is interpreted as the child's ability to bond with significant caring adults. We notice the child's ability to grasp, hold, and release in the naturally playful, repetitive, spoon-dropping game. This game often comes to an end when the adult puts the spoon out of reach and begins to feed the child, shifting the focus of the child-adult interaction from playing together to caring for.

From a socio-cultural perspective of learning, the infant is viewed as someone who is already forming her identity as a citizen and learner in relationship with others. The adult coos knowingly, engaging the infant in a socially reciprocal exchange that communicates, "You are important to me."



The child responds with her gaze and cooing in a way that communicates, “I am interested in knowing you.” This adult understands this interaction as having potential influence on how the child views herself as a social learner and citizen already. As the child grows, she engages an adult in the “Drop and Pick-Up” game. The adult’s willingness to follow the child’s initiative communicates, “You are someone who can make things happen.” Again, the adult views the interaction as a significant moment in how the child sees herself as a learner and citizen—as someone who can make things happen. In our role as educators, this perspective also allows us to consider that the spoon as a cultural artifact may be representative of the child’s family, social, and cultural feeding practices.



Two preschool children, a girl and a boy, are in the house corner with the dolls. The girl states, “You are the dad. You have to go to work now.” Following the directions of his friend, the boy begins to leave the house area. Another young boy moves into the house area and is confronted by the boy who is the dad, “No, you can’t play. I’m playing here.”

The boy turns away and walks over to the adult who is sitting with some children at the drawing table. He snuggles into her. After briefly rubbing his back, she helps him to a chair and puts paper and crayons in front of him without a word. He sits for some time fiddling with the crayon. He doesn’t respond to her queries about what he will draw and seems uninterested in what the children around the table are drawing.

From a developmental perspective of learning, play is understood as the child’s domain, not to be interrupted or interfered with by adults. **Learning through play** philosophy, grounded in a developmental perspective of learning, supports the view that children develop through universal and predictable stages of play, from solitary to parallel to the more complex sustained episodes of cooperative socio-dramatic play, which is understood as the most sophisticated form of play achieved by children later in their development.⁸

Educators are positioned as providers of play spaces, who supply child-size props that represent real world objects. They also provide time and multiple activities that offer children choices for their play and learning experiences.





Educators spend time with small groups of children at various play centres supervising the use of materials and managing conflicts between children as they arise.⁹ In this scenario, the girl and boy were participating harmoniously and therefore no adult was present in the interaction. This reflects an image of the child at play as innocent and just having fun. The exclusion of the second boy went undetected by the educator. Yet, what do you suppose he learns about himself in relationship with others through this interaction?

From a socio-cultural perspective of learning, the educators might join the children's socio-dramatic play, thoughtfully and respectfully becoming a co-player and a co-learner. As a co-player in children's play, educators are in a unique position to extend children's ideas and/or challenge inequities that arise. Through this perspective, educators view each experience as a learning opportunity alongside the children. In this case the educators may explore the social and cultural dynamics of the group of children in relationship with one another and adults. What roles does this child typically play? When does he take on a lead role? When does he control and direct the play? When does he exclude others from play? How often is the other boy excluded from play? How can I watch for further incidents of exclusion? When is this boy engaged in social play? Is he ever able to negotiate a role for himself with other children? As a player, the educator has an opportunity to imagine possibilities along with children by wondering about other roles that would enable the boy to join in the play.

A post-foundational perspective views these children as actively exploring relationships of power and identity and children's play experiences as opportunities for educators to learn about children and how they relate with others.¹⁰ Educators would listen to, observe, and reflect on their own interactions to identify unintended messages related to **equity** and fairness. In this sample narrative, the educator may not recognize that she could be responding to boys differently than girls when they are upset. By considering this, she would have an opportunity to question and reflect on her interactions with children and move toward more equitable practices regarding gender.



Sophie finishes washing her hands and scans the table for a seat at lunch. She has two choices: to sit in a chair beside Nora or Dakota. She chooses the chair beside Dakota. Later that day, Sophie explores the tubes and funnels in the water table. Nora puts on a water shirt and joins Sophie. Sophie immediately leaves the water table.

The following day, Sophie is painting at the easel with Emily. Nora enters the room with her mom. Sophie leans over to Emily and whispers, “She is so ugly. Look at her skin.” Fran, the educator, is startled by Sophie’s comment. She doesn’t know how to respond.

Later that day, Fran shares her observation with her team, “I don’t understand why Sophie would say that about Nora. Sophie has the same skin colour as Nora and the same colour hair. Why would she say that Nora is ugly?” After a lengthy conversation, the team decides to examine their environment for evidence of diversity and cultural representations of their families. They decide to record who is playing with whom and to talk with families about which friends their children talk about at home. The educators are focused on learning about the social and cultural dynamics between the children in this group to understand what is happening between Sophie and Nora. They consider their own interactions with individual children as well.

From a developmental perspective of learning, educators may view the comment as an expression of either the innocent child or the misbehaving child. Both views elicit opportunities to teach the children appropriate social skills about what one should, or should not, say to a friend. The kind of comment shared by Sophie might be considered as “unintentional” and ignored; or perhaps the educators might consider the behaviour “unkind” and teach the children how to talk with friends using “kind” words. If the negative behaviour continues, the educators might move Sophie away from Nora in efforts to minimize the problem behaviour.

From a socio-cultural perspective of learning, educators view the social and cultural context of the learning environment as influencing factors in the way children learn about social and cultural norms. From this perspective, children are seen as **co-constructors** of knowledge actively interpreting what they have seen and heard. As co-learners and co-researchers,



these educators understand that children learn about discrimination through social and cultural experiences. The educators select children's picture books that help the children to see characters of varied cultural backgrounds in strong and capable roles.

The educators continue to examine the early learning and child care environment for hidden messages about culture and race, which reflects a post-foundational perspective of learning. The educators focus on learning about how the child care environment may be communicating discriminatory messages and work to understand and resolve the inequities for the benefit of children as well as families. For example, storybooks may highlight princesses who are white, blond, and blue-eyed and villains who are dark skinned, with dark hair and brown eyes. Further incidents would be talked about with children, and perhaps stories regarding exclusion and inclusion may be shared to provoke conversations with the children to challenge assumptions of gender, race, colour, ability, and ethnicity.

As educators, when you understand how the image of the child is constructed and influenced by theories of learning, you begin to understand how your curriculum decisions are reflected through your daily interactions and the design of the care, play, and learning environment.¹¹ A view of the child as innocent may make the inequities that can exist in children's play invisible. A view of the child as incapable or deficient may limit how learning occurs and miss opportunities for imagining creative and novel ways of playing, seeking, participating, persisting, and caring. A view of the child as bad or good communicates the child's value in the community. When you choose an image of the child as a strong, resourceful, and capable mighty learner and citizen, you enter into relationships with children to learn about what they know and want to know and you have an opportunity to respond to that information through your curriculum decisions.

Constructing an image of the child: a strong, resourceful, capable child— a mighty learner and citizen.

How do you notice and name each child as a mighty learner and citizen? The following sample narratives highlight children as **mighty learners**. They are followed by reflective questions to help you think about your practice in relationship with children as mighty learners and citizens.



A toddler's father slouches over, walking along behind his infant son with his hands held ready. He does not interfere with the boy's walking adventure in the uneven outdoor space. The father patiently and supportively encourages his son's risk-taking endeavour and, in doing so, his son learns that he is a **mover** in the world.

As an educator, how do you view children's risk-taking ventures?

Think about opportunities for children to test their own limits in ways that are challenging, yet safe.

A preschooler's many questions engage her experienced and patient grandparents in their effort to explain the curiosities of a familiar yet wondrous world, "Why Gran, why do the stars only shine at night?" "Where do they go in the day?" "How do they turn on?"

How do you as an educator view children's questions?

Think about when your answer to a child's question ended the conversation. **Think about** when children's questions have provoked further thought and exploration for the whole group.

Many young learners persist with rolling objects down a ramp, filling and dumping buckets of water, or building and rebuilding towers of blocks. It is these trials and observations that help the child to build, and then refine, his or her theories about how the world works.

Who listens to those theories in your child care setting? Will the children's theories be heard as cute comments or potential possibilities for learning? **Think about** how theories can initiate further exploration and problem solving with children.

A young child, so aware of his community, eagerly joins each and every new experience that his peers engage in. He busily moves from play space to play space. He is interested in what others are interested in. He is interested in connecting with others and soon settles in with a group who are dancing to recorded music along with their educator.



When you adopt a strong, resourceful, capable image of the child you respond to children's dispositions to learn within children's everyday play and social interactions.

As an educator, how do you view the “busy” child? **Think about** how a “busy” child is responded to by peers and adults.

Think about how that child's “busyness” can inspire further inquiry and playfulness in the community.

With the help of their educators, a group of children have researched healthy options for yogurt as a snack item. They are presenting their research to Ella, the centre cook. They are about to request that she consider information about a different kind of yogurt for snack.

What image of the child provoked the educators to support the children's activism for challenging decisions regarding food choices in the child care setting? **Think about** the ways children can express preferences for something different or concern for others, the environment, and living things.

Each of these children is learning about how the world works and who they are in the world in relationship with others. As you see from everyday experiences with children, one child may be more willing to pursue his ideas in the presence of difficulty. Another child may be more willing to be a risk taker by challenging her own physical limits. Within this curriculum framework, we have identified **playing, seeking, participating, persisting, and caring** as important dispositions to nurture in young children for their learning and **citizenship**. When you adopt a strong, resourceful, capable image of the child you respond to children's dispositions to learn within children's everyday play and social interactions.

You construct an image of child as a mighty learner when you notice and name them:

- **playing**, creating, inventing, imagining the many possibilities with blocks or paint or glue or clay. A child playing with storytelling and creating a character role alongside others in an imaginative story or story of family practices is a mighty learner. A child playing with ways to express ideas with music or drama or building or images is a mighty learner. Each playing and playful child is a mighty learner.
- **seeking**, asking many questions, exploring the world with all or some of his or her senses: touch, smell, taste, sight, and hearing, and whole body exploration. Each child seeking and wondering about all kinds of ways that the world is familiar, different, changing, and challenging is a mighty learner.



- **participating** with others, observing what others are doing, or listening and sharing ideas and opinions, negotiating for shared understanding or for turns. Each child participating with materials and ideas and others is a mighty learner.
- **persisting** with challenges and difficulty with ideas and with others. Each child persisting with new strategies, by asking for help when needed or trying again another day, is a mighty learner.
- **caring** about family, self, and others. Each child caring about the world and all living things, someone who says and demonstrates “I can help,” is a mighty learner.

For support to think about **how** and **what** you might do to reflect on your image of the child and plan for children’s learning and citizenship, see:

- **Mighty Learners: Nurturing Children’s Dispositions to Learn**
- **A Practice of Relationships: Your Role as Early Learning and Child Care Educator**
- **Reflection and Planning Guide**
- **Responsive Environments: Time, Space, Materials, and Participation**

As well, you will find a collection of **Curriculum Sample Learning Stories** highlighting a strong, resourceful, and capable image of the young child—a mighty learner and citizen.

