



2.3

Mighty Learners: Nurturing Children's Dispositions to Learn



Every child is a mighty learner. A mighty learner brings body and mind—his or her whole being—to play and learning. To be mighty means to be powerful, robust, vigorous, stalwart, and awe-inspiring. The image of the child described within this curriculum framework is a strong, resourceful, capable child—a mighty learner and citizen.

2.3 Mighty Learners: Nurturing Children's Dispositions to Learn

As an early learning and child care educator watches, two young preschoolers sit in the sandbox with scoops in hand and one container between them. Both children are focused on scooping sand and take turns to pour the sand from their scoop into the container. Once the container is filled, they look at one another and smile. They stand up and attempt to lift the sand-filled container. The educator photographs the children as they briefly exchange ideas, and then tip the container over to empty some of the sand. They pick up the half-filled container and take it to the playhouse where their play continues. She comments to them, "You solved your problem."



These children are **mighty learners**. They demonstrate flexible thinking when confronted with a problem—a very heavy full container. Their theory appears to be that if they remove some of the sand they will be able to lift the container. By testing their theory, they solve their problem and their play continues. The educator has designed the environment through the provision of materials and time and space for social play, offering these children opportunity to work collaboratively and to solve problems within their play. These experiences nurture and strengthen children's learning. When educators closely observe children's play, they can plan further opportunities for children to create and test theories within active and social play situations.

A preschooler is drawn to the cry of his friend. He offers a stuffed teddy bear in an attempt to bring comfort to his friend who just said goodbye to his mom. His educator acknowledges his caring attention, "You cared for Emil when he was upset. Look, the teddy bear is comforting him."

This young child is a **mighty learner**. He already acts in a caring way toward his friend. By offering the comfort toy, he demonstrates his understanding of comfort objects, possibly



from his own experience. His educator’s response acknowledges and affirms his effort to comfort his friend by naming his actions and, in this way, his educator communicates that caring for others is valued in the early childhood community.

The term “mighty” was used by a mother who expressed her hopes and dreams for her daughter to always pursue her passions, even when considered different than passions of others.¹ As developers, we adopted this term to exemplify the learning potential of each child. Along with the holistic play-based goals, dispositions to learn² are introduced as a reflective and interpretive frame for educators to make this learning potential visible to children, families, and ourselves. The dispositions to learn that are highlighted in this curriculum framework focus on the dimensions of **playing, seeking, participating, persisting, and caring.**

Educators make this learning potential visible when we recognize the dispositions to learn that young children already bring to every situation. In the curriculum framework, we understand dispositions to learn as inclinations that are revealed in unique ways through children’s play, learning, and living in early childhood communities. Children are often described using these inclinations: “He is so caring,” “They are playful friends with one another.” In early childhood research, children’s dispositions to learn are recognized as a foundation for/in learning and for developing later school-based learning competencies.³

The notion that each child learns every day through every situation is a central idea in the Alberta curriculum framework. The rationale to focus on nurturing and strengthening each child’s dispositions to learn recognizes that as young children learn about the world, they also learn about who they are as learners. When educators see each and every child as a mighty learner and citizen—as someone who plays, seeks, participates, persists, and cares—each child begins to see him- or herself in this way.

Children’s dispositions are revealed to us in their play, learning, and daily experiences. “It is not about the blocks or the dough. It is about the activity being the vehicle for the acquisition of dispositions to learn.”⁴ In this curriculum framework, dispositions to learn are understood as

- coming from within each child and emerging over time.
- inclinations that educators and others can nurture, strengthen, or diminish through our everyday interactions with each child in the social context of learning and living.

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- inclinations that each child draws upon in both new and familiar learning experiences.
- having culturally specific meanings and value revealed through family, social, and cultural practices and traditions.⁵

Recognizing that there are many dispositions that children demonstrate in their care, play, learning, and development, the dispositions to learn described in this curriculum framework are intended to support the image of the child as a mighty learner and citizen. Dispositions to learn are situated in the context of care, play, and learning and therefore are expressed as active verbs,⁶ as well as from the perspectives of “I/we.” The “I” refers to each member of the learning community as unique—each child, family member, and educator who also draw upon these dispositions to learn. The “we” reflects the notion that children, educators, and families **co-construct** knowledge and learning together and within a context of the learning environment including time, space, materials, and our modelling, participating, and interacting with children in our care, play, learning, and development. We use the combination “I/we” intentionally to remind us that care, play, and learning are always both individually and socially constructed.

The following five dispositions to learn have been selected based on feedback from the curriculum framework provincial advisory committee, as well as input from several **family** focus group conversations. These dispositions to learn (not intended to exclude other dispositions to learn) reflect the image of the child described within this curriculum framework—the image of a capable, strong, and resourceful child who is an **agentic** and active learner—a **mighty learner and citizen**.

- **I/we are playing and playful:** I/we are inventing, creating, and imagining. I/we are creating and testing theories. I/we are telling and directing narratives and stories. I/we are exploring and representing our knowledge using multimodal literacies. I/we are taking risks in/for learning.
- **I/we are seeking:** I/we are questioning. I/we are exploring with all our senses. I/we are wondering and are curious. I/we are solving problems in our play and learning.
- **I/we are participating:** I/we are engaging with others. I/we are listening to and sharing ideas, thoughts, and feelings. I/we are negotiating, taking turns, and observing.



- **I/we are persisting:** I/we are persevering with challenges and/or difficulties. I/we are trying new strategies. I/we are asking for help. I/we are striving to reach our own goals.
- **I/we are caring:** I/we are helping. I/we are caring about our families, one another, and ourselves. I/we are caring for the world and living things.

Noticing, Naming, Nurturing Children’s Dispositions to Learn

Dispositions to learn are nurtured and strengthened, or diminished, through daily interactions of care, play, and learning, as well as through the design of the play and learning environment (time, space, materials, and participation). A learning environment that provides for and acknowledges multiple ways for children to explore and/or create with open-ended materials and with others nurtures and strengthens each child’s dispositions to learn. In contrast, an environment that insists on children doing the same thing at the same time in the same way diminishes dispositions to learn. For example, this kind of environment limits children’s opportunities to play with ideas and others and persist through challenges to invent problem solutions.

What educators do matters! How do you model these dispositions to learn in your everyday practice for children to see? As well, when you notice, name, and nurture each child’s dispositions to learn, you cultivate a community that values each child’s identity as a mighty learner and citizen.

Play is central to the Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework. “Play and Playfulness” is a holistic play-based goal. Play(ing) and playfulness are both conditions for and dispositions to learn.

Understanding the importance of playing and playfulness as a disposition to learn shifts our view as educators from, “Oh, the children are playing,” to “What can I do to support and extend the play experience for these children in ways that support their playing and playfulness, as well as their opportunities for seeking, participating, persisting, and caring to flourish?” Our focus on nurturing and strengthening each child’s dispositions to learn creates opportunities for learning that reflects each child and their learner identity authentically.

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Documenting Children's Dispositions to Learn

Making children's dispositions to learn visible is an important aspect of our role as educators. Children's dispositions to learn are not intended to be measured and do not lend themselves to checklists of accomplished tasks; rather, educators are encouraged to document children's growing dispositions to learn within the context of the early childhood environment. Documenting children's care, play, learning, and development using photography, recorded words, and collected artifacts of children's work makes children's dispositions to learn visible. Children's documented play and learning endeavours can be used to engage children, families, and educators in meaningful conversations about not only the outcome of learning events but, more importantly, the processes and qualities of being a learner.

A **Learning Story** is one approach to documenting children's dispositions to learn within daily experiences of care, play, learning, and development.⁷ These stories should be shared with children, offering them opportunity to revisit their experiences and talk about their own accomplishments in play and learning. **Learning stories** can provide families with documentation of their child's learning for building continuity across early childhood communities, such as when making the transition from child care to formal school.⁸ In addition, documentation of children's care, play, learning, and development can help us as educators to reflect on their curriculum decisions for the design of the playroom environment as well as their interactions with children.

The five dispositions to learn—I/we are playing and playful, I/we are seeking, I/we are participating, I/we are persisting, I/we are caring—are described more fully in **Children's Dispositions to Learn**. Included are sample narratives to illustrate how an educator might notice and name a child's dispositions to learn. These sample narratives are intended to highlight the relationship between an educator's image of the child as a mighty learner and citizen and curriculum decisions. Following each narrative, a series of questions encourage reflection on one's own practice.

