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A Practice of Relationships: Your Role as an Early Learning and Child Care Educator



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When asked, “What is it about your work that keeps you going?” Early learning and child care educators often respond with a sentiment that goes something like, “It’s the love I have...” “It’s the caring that I feel...” “It’s the joy I experience each day as I work with young children and their families.” Yet, your work as educators is more than love, caring, and joy—it is work that is multifaceted, complex, and dynamic. Your role as **co-learner, co-researcher, co-imaginer of possibilities** calls for a playful and seeking spirit, a willingness to participate, persist, and care, even when it is challenging. As well, your role is made more dynamic through imagining, creating, and inventing possibilities.

A **practice of relationships**¹ describes the complex and dynamic relationships with diverse community members and begins as you learn with and alongside children and families. When you engage in a practice of relationships, you create **places of vitality** in early childhood communities with children—as **mighty learners** and citizens—and their families.

Families, children, and educators create places of vitality together. Places of vitality are strong, active, and energetic communities, fostered by educators who engage in a practice of relationships.²

Educators work within a practice of relationships with children and families. Appreciating the significance of the family in the life of the child, you enter into a relationship with families along with the relationships you nurture with children. It is the quality of the relationships between educators, children, and families that characterizes the early childhood community experience for families and remains in their memories and the memories of their children. In a similar way to the image of the child, the image of the family is also constructed within social, cultural, historical, economic, and political contexts.³ The image of the family that you hold influences your participation with families and communicates to children how their family is valued in early childhood communities. When you value family connections and contributions, you are more likely to engage families in



open, respectful, and reciprocal dialogue to share and generate ideas, solve problems, and learn more deeply about children. In turn, their relationships with you can add value to family life.

Families know their children in ways that no one else can.

This particular knowledge of the child has roots in family, social, and **cultural practices** and traditions.⁴ Family practices and parent–child interactions influence and are influenced by the stresses and demands of daily living and are interwoven with the family’s hopes and desires for their child’s future. Their image of their child unfolds over a lifetime.

Family, social, and cultural practices and traditions are the typical experiences families share. These practices and traditions take shape and become meaningful within family life and everyday living. They are the rituals around what happens on Thursday evenings or Sunday afternoons as much as they are about cultural celebrations. Practices and traditions may involve connection to extended family members, religious communities, as well as ethnic groups. They are expressed through daily experiences and parenting practices like sharing food, bedtime rituals, and toilet learning. They include experiences such as cooking with Opa or going to the park with Auntie (who is a very special community elder and auntie to many in the community). As educators listen to, reflect on, and consider the significance of family practices and traditions they support each child’s identity within their family and the family’s identity within the early childhood community, and deepen their practice of relationships.

Without question, the relationships between educators, children, and families are primary; yet, the relationships that you build with other community members also support and strengthen the experiences of families and children with/in the early childhood community. You work in relationships with colleagues to share information and to collaborate on planning for care routines and children’s play, learning, and development. You also work in relationships with government officials to ensure policies and standards are established and maintained. At times, you work in relationships with individuals who provide specialized services to families and children. You seek and build relationships with community members to enhance and extend children’s learning experiences. As well, you seek relationships with the broader early childhood community for your own professional growth. This network of relationships supports your complex, dynamic, and multifaceted role as an educator. We describe your work within this network as a practice of



Healthy communities are places of vitality “where people are in relationships that encourage growth, creativity, innovation, problem solving, and progress, as people come together and pool their individual perspectives, wisdom, strengths, and skills.”

Co-construct refers to a process of creating in relationship with others. Learning takes place in a social context—as children interact with and work together with educators, other children, and materials.⁷ The prefix “co” is used throughout the framework to remind us of the importance of social relationships in children’s early learning.

relationships—a practice that nurtures healthy early childhood communities where diverse people come together for the benefit of children’s care, play, learning, and development.⁵

Healthy communities are places of vitality—“[early childhood] communities where people are in relationships that encourage growth, creativity, innovation, problem solving, and progress, as people come together and pool their individual perspectives, wisdom, strengths, and skills.”⁶ Your role as an educator is central in facilitating and nurturing the multiple relationships that co-exist in early childhood communities. Within a practice of relationships, you gather information from a range of community members who present unique perspectives about families and children. However, you also have particular knowledge of families and children—knowledge situated within the context of your own early learning and child care environment. Mediating and transforming multiple perspectives is an ongoing challenge.

The dynamic and complex role you take on as an educator is supported by:

- **your knowledge of unique family, social, and cultural practices and traditions** gained through thoughtful, respectful, and open communication with families.
- **your current theoretical knowledge of child development** that supports your design of environments for children’s care, play, learning, and development that are both actively engaging and appropriately challenging.
- **your knowledge of theories of learning** that assists you in recognizing the importance of responsive early learning environments that include thoughtful consideration for time, space, materials, and participation, thereby influencing how each child co-constructs his or her own learner identity, sense of belonging, and citizenship with/in the community.
- your understanding of the four Alberta curriculum framework **holistic play-based goals for early learning and care** (Well-being, Play and Playfulness, Communication and Literacies, and Diversity and Social Responsibility)⁸ along with the five **dispositions to learn** (playing, seeking, participating, persisting, and caring), which support your reflection and planning of learning experiences that connect to and expand on children’s interests.

As an educator, you are always evolving your practice within multiple relationships. You may sometimes think of yourself



as a gardener or an artist, sometimes a plumber or handy fixer of small toys, and sometimes a builder and designer of spaces. Caring for children and their families, you take on many roles while keeping in mind an image of the child: a strong, capable, and resourceful learner and citizen.

The framework describes your role of educator as a **co-learner**, a **co-researcher**, and a **co-imaginer of possibilities**. The prefix “co” reflects our belief in the importance of you co-constructing knowledge with children, their families, and colleagues, rather than only transmitting knowledge to the learners or leaving the learners to construct knowledge on their own. This image of the educator aligns with the Alberta curriculum framework’s **socio-cultural perspective of learning**.

Educator as Co-Learner

As an educator, you guide, scaffold, nurture, model, and facilitate children’s learning and through this work you learn about what children know and how children make meaning of the world. As you engage as a co-learner with and alongside children, the children see that learning is valued for all community members. Children’s dispositions to learn are nurtured and strengthened over time and within care, play, and learning environments.⁹ As a co-learner, you make visible your own dispositions of playing, seeking, participating, persisting, and caring. These dispositions to learn are described in greater detail in ***Mighty Learners: Nurturing Children’s Dispositions to Learn***.

For you as co-learner,

- **playing is inventing, creating, imagining, and taking risks in the spirit of learning, building theories, and co-authoring narratives alongside and with children.** To be playful means that you are willing to follow children in their play, to respond to children’s playful endeavours, ideas, thoughts, and ways of being in playful ways. Through your own playfulness, you take risks in the spirit of learning, and you honour the playfulness of children.
- **seeking is being curious about others and the world.** Asking questions, exploring with your senses, being curious, and trying new and different ways to do something are ways that you are a seeker. What can you learn about this child and/or this family that will help you to support a sense of belonging in this community? What do you know about this child as a learner? What do you know about this group of children? Who are you as a learner?

Caring for children and their families, you take on many roles while keeping in mind an image of the child: a strong, capable, and resourceful learner and citizen.



When you participate with children and families as co-learners, co-researchers, and co-imaginings of possibilities, you create responsive environments for children’s care, play, learning, and development that reflect an image of the child as a mighty learner and citizen—strong, resourceful, and capable.



Your willingness to inquire and to pursue questions over time and with/in relationship with others fosters a strong and dynamic early childhood community of learners.

- **participating with children and families and the broader community** involves inviting other points of view and other ways of being. You demonstrate flexibility and responsiveness through careful listening and thoughtful observation. Your participation with children may be in the role of a model, observer, and/or facilitator of their care, play, learning, and development. As well, your participation may involve you as a co-player alongside children who are leading the play. Your participation with children offers you a unique perspective to learn about what children know and are trying to accomplish in their daily experiences. As well, your participation with families may involve advocating with and on behalf of families as you learn about and then help them access supportive community programs.
- **persisting is pursuing an idea and/or looking for solutions.** Trying a new approach, gathering more information, and learning from others are ways that you can co-create solutions to problems and concerns. Families, children, and colleagues of early childhood communities are valuable sources of information and inspiration for you.
- **caring is demonstrating concern for, providing time for, and suspending judgment of others.** To care is to act ethically in decision-making and in relationships. Care is central to a practice of relationships.

Educator as Co-Researcher

It is by acting as a researcher that you gain an understanding of the complexities of how children and their families experience early childhood communities, and local and global communities. The process of research involves asking questions, investigating, reflecting, interpreting, and sharing the results with families, children, and local communities.

For you as co-researcher,

- **asking authentic questions—questions you do not know the answers to—offers you opportunity to gather insights and perspectives.** Questions may explore your centre’s or your own decisions relating to daily practices and policies; children’s care, play, learning, and development; family, social, and cultural practices and traditions; and issues of



equity and fairness. Your questions should provoke further action in the form of observation, investigation, reading, and reflection to inform your curriculum decisions.

- **investigating what has or could take place offers you opportunity to understand many perspectives.** Investigating can involve careful listening and observing, documenting using photography, video, scribing words, and anecdotal recording of particular situations. Investigating requires an open mind. By suspending your assumptions you can hear other perspectives. Your investigation may require further information from a range of sources including conversations with families, professional resources, and/or may include entering into children's play as a co-player to understand what the children are experiencing or trying to accomplish.
- **reflecting on and revisiting experiences of the children and families offers you an opportunity to think deeply about each child's care, play, learning, and development and their family's perspective.** This can involve looking at your own practice, documented moments of children's care, play, learning, and development, and your interactions with families. Reflection offers you opportunity to take a step back and think about your practice and children's experiences with respect to pursuing a deeper understanding of what might be taking place from other perspectives. Reflecting with others invites multiple perspectives and inspires further questions for inquiry.
- **interpreting information offers you an opportunity to understand children's care, play, learning, and development experiences with respect to current understandings of curriculum.** This involves considering what you think children are trying to do, communicate, and accomplish in their play and learning. It also involves thinking about what families might value and want for their children and how that relates to your daily work with each child. Your interpretations reflect your own values, knowledge, and social and cultural experiences, as well as your image of the child and your image of the family.
- **sharing what you have learned offers you an opportunity to talk** about, visually and verbally, the children's daily care, play, learning, and development experiences as they relate to your curriculum decisions—your professional practice. Sharing with families and local communities can be in the form of written and visual documentation and/or story, as

Children flourish in environments that are beautiful, joyful, and rich with opportunities for sensory stimulation, social interaction, language, exploration, manipulation, and representation.





well as dialogue with families, the children, and the broader community. Making children's learning visible in ways that advocate for children may help to gain support and awareness of children's potential as mighty learners and citizens.

Educator as Co-Imaginers of Possibilities

There are many ways of being, doing, and relating. As you work in collaboration with families, children, and community members you seek out diverse perspectives and in turn co-imagine creative and novel ways of thinking about familiar and/or new experiences.

For you, co-imagining possibilities

- **is being playful with others, ideas, and ways of being.**

"I wonder..." "What if...?" Your participation with children and families to co-imagine possibilities holds potential for expanding and deepening learning experiences and appreciation for family, social, and cultural practices and traditions.

- **involves imagining, creating, and inventing** what you hope for and/or want to see. Through your own participation and inviting the participation of children and their families, the potential for creating healthy communities—places of vitality—becomes possible. Co-imagining possibilities may involve working with others to advocate for more government and community programs that can promote families' and children's well-being.

- **may require taking risks and facing challenges within the spirit of learning**, for example, experimenting with new care routines and/or play and learning experiences to support children and families in meaningful ways that are safe, caring, and honouring of the many ways children and adults participate and live together.

When you participate with children and families as co-learners, co-researchers, and co-imaginers of possibilities, you create **responsive environments** for children that reflect an image of the child as a mighty learner and citizen. As well, you draw on your knowledge of child development, theories of learning, and curriculum values, principles, goals, and dispositions to learn. This work that you do is multifaceted, complex, and dynamic—it is an always evolving practice of relationships.

