

# Handle with Care

Strategies for Promoting the  
Mental Health of Young Children  
in Community-Based Child Care



CANADIAN MENTAL  
HEALTH ASSOCIATION  
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE  
POUR LA SANTÉ MENTALE



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This booklet was prepared as part of the Early Childhood Care and Mental Health Project, carried out by the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Hincks-Dellcrest Centre. The purpose of the project was to explore ways that the mental health of young children can be promoted in community-based child care centres. In this context, mental health promotion is seen as development of age-appropriate and culturally relevant life skills that benefit all children's social and emotional development. This booklet is timely given the need for out-of-home child care as a vital support for working parents, the awareness that the foundations of mental health are shaped from the earliest days of life and the growing trend toward child care for increasingly younger children. Centre-based child care has been suggested as a particularly good site for mental health promotion given the large number of children enrolled.

The strategies described in this booklet are based on policies and practices collected from 81 Canadian child care centres. Both Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) practitioners working directly with children and ECCE centre directors were interviewed. We also explored issues specific to the centres' context, namely ways that centres develop positive relationships with children's families and how they support the well-being of practitioners. Research suggests that these issues indirectly impact the promotion of children's mental health. The project's other product, a review of research literature, provides an understanding about individual and environmental characteristics that promote children's mental health in child care settings. This review is available at [www.cmha.ca](http://www.cmha.ca) and [www.hincksdellcrest.org](http://www.hincksdellcrest.org).

In completing the scan interviews and compiling responses to develop the booklet, a number of important issues became clear. First, recognition of the diversity of cultures, family backgrounds and life experiences of Canadian children makes the consideration of mental health promotion complex. While we consistently encourage practitioners to acknowledge and respect different family characteristics and choices, we must concede that many suggestions presented in this booklet may not be consistent with all family and cultural expectations and practices. Practitioners are advised to be responsive to individual children and their circumstances; in fact, a flexible approach that accommodates the particular needs of children is just as important as the actual strategies practitioners use. Connected to this, the booklet's usage of the term 'parents' is meant to include parents and/or other important adults in children's home lives that influence their development and may have interactions with child care centres. Ongoing transactions between the child, parent, ECCE practitioners, community and society as a whole, are responsible for children's social and emotional development and, in this spirit, we hope that readers use this booklet as a guide.

Second, suggestions in this booklet represent best practices gleaned from highly recommended child care centres. In this respect, the practices reflect strategies that can be achieved where optimal centre situations exist. In reality, centres may face barriers that affect their ability to implement such practices. Additionally, standards concerning ECCE practitioners' qualifications differ across Canada. Consequently, while the booklet contains suggestions about working with families and community resources, practitioners' variable knowledge and experience of these topics in the field may limit the ability of some centres to implement the suggestions. Most ECCE practitioners are also faced with other issues connected to mental health promotion and can benefit from information gained through supervisors, professional development and external consultation. It is critical to point out that the Canadian child care system lacks a coherent approach to policy. By increasing awareness about the importance of mental health promotion in child care, we hope to convey the message that a national approach to child care funding, philosophy and practitioner education is imperative to ensure such promotion efforts are successful.

While this project is intended to raise awareness about mental health promotion in child care settings, it by no means lessens the significance of prevention and intervention. Practitioners in child care centres must always be alert to the difficulties or delays children may exhibit and be prepared to seek assistance as necessary.

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# PICTURING MENTAL HEALTH PROMOTION IN CHILD CARE

## Setting Up the Scene...

When you look around your child care centre, you're probably amazed by how much is going on. There are children, staff, supervisors and directors. Parents, specialists and members of the community might also be there. At any given moment, these different people are busy with something. There are children at work and play, doing things by themselves and with other children, interacting with adults and peers, experiencing positive and negative feelings, success and disappointment, friendly play and conflict. Meanwhile, the adults in the centre may be doing structured or informal activities with children, collaborating with each other to support children's development, and working together to create a positive environment. It is easy to see how your centre is its own little world.



## What Do We See?

Infants, toddlers and preschoolers go through many significant stages of development. Early childhood marks a time of rapid growth in children's mental and physical abilities, language skills and relationships with caregivers and other children, to name just a few areas. In particular, experiences in the first three years of life help shape connections in children's brains that can provide the blueprint for the kind of adults they will become. Each environment they come into contact with has a powerful impact on what children learn about themselves and the things around them. Your child care centre is one such environment. It's a place where children can receive positive stimulation and nurturing that will help them be happy and healthy. It can also help children deal with challenges that they face both inside and outside of the centre.





## Focusing In...

Despite their young ages, the children in your centre are constantly encountering social and emotional issues that affect their self-esteem, attachments, friendships and feeling and expression of emotions. Positive development in these areas is essential for promoting mental health. The goal of mental health promotion in early childhood is to develop age-appropriate and culturally relevant life skills that enhance children's well-being and set the stage for positive mental health throughout their life. Good mental health depends on: children forming secure relationships with adults, the ability to express emotions and control emotions and behaviour to meet particular situations, confidence and a sense of being unique, autonomy in making choices and problem solving, self motivation to explore and try new experiences and the ability to cope with change.



## Taking the Picture... Mental Health Promotion

Whether you're a practitioner, supervisor or director, you play a part in mental health promotion. Mental health promotion takes place at many different levels in your centre. It is linked to good daily practices that foster children's social-emotional development, build family and community connections and create a positive working climate for staff. It's important to realize that mental health promotion can be involved in all of the interactions you see. Although structured activities and programs may be useful, regular day-to-day interactions create a larger and more meaningful imprint on children. Finding opportunities for mental health promotion is just as important as forming them.

Let's discover what this means. In this booklet, we will go around the centre and see how mental health promotion can take place. We will also look at examples of good practices recommended by your colleagues in centres across Canada. There are plenty of everyday situations where you can incorporate strategies that promote children's mental health. We'll also see that the type of strategies to use may depend on whether we're focussing on infants, toddlers or preschoolers.



# DEVELOPING TRUST BETWEEN PRACTITIONER AND CHILD



Typically, children have the strongest attachments to their parents. Parents take care of their children's needs, offer loving care, keep them safe and comfort them in times of distress. At the centre though, children must trust that a practitioner will meet their needs in these ways. When this happens, children develop an attachment to the practitioner. It takes time, but will help children feel secure and confident to express their curiosity, explore their surroundings, control their emotions and behaviour and develop positive relationships

with others. Secure attachments provide an important foundation for promoting mental health.

Forming a secure relationship at all ages involves the practitioner acting in particular ways:

- Rapidly responding to children who are frightened, ill or otherwise distressed
- Letting children know that the practitioner is there for them
- Providing predictable routines and responses so that the children can count on the practitioner for support
- Creating a safe environment for the children to explore and gradually become more independent
- Taking an active interest in children, offering encouragement and letting them know they are valued

I give the children time to become comfortable with me. I won't push myself on them. The first time at the centre I don't hug and snuggle children right away. It's not appropriate because I am a stranger to them. The second time I put a toy between myself and the child as a way of getting closer, but not too close. Maybe the third time, I will share some physical affection with the child.

## Infants

Sleeping, feeding, diapering and soothing are often the focus of interactions, with practitioners guiding infants. Strategies that can encourage infants to rely on practitioners and foster the infant's sense of security include:

### *Consistent practitioners*

Having one staff member responsible for an individual child's daily routines, including toileting, feeding and sleeping schedules, helps practitioner and child to make a connection.

### *Communication with parents*

Discuss expectations, routines and strategies parents use at home. Incorporating these into the centre can make children feel more comfortable.

### *Making children active participants*

Talking children through routines, telling them what's coming and what will happen will make them feel that their role in events is important.

### *Always doing what you say you'll do*

Keep promises and follow through (e.g., coming back at a certain time) to help children feel that life is safe and predictable.

## Toddlers

Toddlers are more active in interacting with their practitioners. When practitioners build a trusting relationship with toddlers, they feel safe to explore, express themselves and try new things.

### *Being with children at their level*

Meaningful interactions involve getting down to the children's level, making eye contact and using words they understand. This makes them feel like they're having a shared conversation. Listening and responding to all cues while maintaining eye contact helps to validate their feelings.

### *Getting a sense of the child's likes and interests*

Finding out about a child's favourite things through parents or home visits gives practitioners the chance to incorporate these into the centre. Having open-ended conversations about home, important people and pastimes helps children to feel comfortable with practitioners.

It's important for me to be the same person for the children, in terms of mood and disposition, every day, regardless of what happens at home and in my personal life. But if there are negative things going on, children may notice small changes in me. When that happens, I share my feelings in a simple way that lets them know I am not acting differently because of them.

## Don't Forget Parents!

Parents play an important role in helping practitioners build strong relationships with their children. Especially at the start of care, children may look to their parents to see if the unfamiliar setting and people in the centre are safe and friendly. They may react in a similar way as their parents to situations in the centre. Practitioners need to spend time building trust with parents in order to establish trust with children.

"I don't let a parent sneak out. This is important to build trust. For instance, a mom has a baby in her arms and turns the baby over to staff and says "I have to go, but I'm going to leave you with Bertie". Eventually, the baby reaches out for staff."

### *Listening and observing to find out individual responses and reactions*

Staff can help children recognize what they're experiencing by identifying their emotions and body language, as well as using words that reflect the situation (e.g., "Oh you're giving a hug").

"I respect children's preferences as much as possible. That means I need to read a child's body language to see if they want a hug or not. I don't force anything on them. Cultural or family beliefs may also influence what children are comfortable with. I watch how children and their parents communicate so I get an idea of what makes children comfortable. Listening to them is also very important. I respond to both their words and actions. By asking questions and reviewing the personal information they tell me, I help children feel comfortable."

### *Consistency in practitioners' behaviours, language and daily routines*

When practitioners are consistent in their reactions, it helps children find them predictable (e.g., having the same expectations every day about what children are to wear outside). This can also be accomplished by keeping children informed of daily activities and letting them know what their choices are.

## Preschoolers

Preschoolers still need comfort, safety and support even though they have more language and skills. Much of the relationship between practitioner and child now focuses on working together so both of their wishes and needs are met.

### *Provide an accepting environment*

Accepting children for who they are and what they can do helps them to feel nurtured and valued.

### *Greet children and parents*

Children observe whether their parents are comfortable with the practitioners.

### *Parents always say goodbye*

Practitioners need to build a regular routine so children know their parents are coming back.

### *Bringing the family to the centre*

Incorporating children's family photos or security objects from home (e.g., favourite toy or blanket) into the centre can be comforting for children.

### *Honesty*

Practitioners and parents being truthful about how children are doing helps both to feel that they are working together towards the best interests of the child.

### *Giving boundaries*

Consistent and reasonable limits should be the same every day for each child. While established limits need to be followed, children should also be able to experiment and express themselves within these boundaries. Explain reasons for different limits so children know that making things safe and fair for everyone is an important role for practitioners. When boundaries are explained in a positive manner, the focus is on what children can do.

### *Respecting children as individuals*

Let children know you are willing to give them the chance and freedom to do things on their own. Listen to them, use different words to echo what they are saying and confirm their feelings. Knowing their needs, strengths, likes and personalities also helps practitioners respond to children appropriately.

### *Always being accessible*

Joining children on the floor or at a table lets them know that a practitioner is there for them and is really listening. Reassuring children that they can come to a practitioner at any time lets them know they'll receive assistance when they need it.

"No nicknames. I give children the dignity of their names. Nicknames single children out and can make them feel uncomfortable. By using their names a lot, children know that I know who they are and am paying attention to them."

"I present myself as someone who's approachable and always available to the children. Somebody they can get support from. I constantly promote open communication, a mutual honesty between myself and the children. When I say something, I mean it."



# BUILDING AND ENSURING POSITIVE SELF-ESTEEM

Every child has his or her own interests, likes and dislikes. The ways in which they express and pursue their preferences differs as well. The centre offers an excellent environment for children's emerging sense of self. It allows children to figure out who they are and how they are different from everyone else. To promote mental health, practitioners can assist children in becoming aware and proud of their individuality.

When you care for four in your group, you are working with the group, but you are also learning how to relate to four individual children. You get to know their eccentricities. You have to learn the most appropriate methods of connecting with each child.



## Getting to Know Them... Infants and Toddlers

With limited language and mobility, infants and toddlers are just starting to form a sense of self and to differentiate between themselves and others. They have particular patterns of behaviour marked by daily events like sleeping and eating. Also, they show individual responses and reactions to emotion provoking situations.

Practitioners can encourage children to view themselves positively and feel that they are valued by others.

### *Accept each child*

The same standards and expectations don't work for all children as they try to figure out who they are. Observing individual characteristics and cues provides information that helps practitioners to be flexible and accommodating with children.

### *Encourage awareness*

Encourage children to appreciate their own and others' unique qualities. This includes their physical traits, preferences and belongings. In the process, children also come to recognize that other people notice their uniqueness as well.

### *Highlight individuality*

Pointing out individual things that children say, have and do in a positive manner emphasizes how each child's uniqueness is valued.

### *Describe when you praise*

Using words that describe children's actions and accomplishments reinforces their strengths and efforts more than evaluative comments such as "good girl".

Some kids are generally more active. We need to provide alternative positive outlets instead of getting agitated and antsy about their behaviour. For instance, one child doesn't sleep during naptime. So instead he plays in a quiet corner away from the other children.

Children each have a little box that has a picture of themselves placed on the inside. When they lift the lid they can see themselves.

All children have picture symbols to represent their names. The symbols suit the personality of the child (e.g., fish, boats, dinosaurs). We give them choices based on their interests. We use symbols to identify different children's personal spaces and accomplishments and they use it to indicate what activity area they are working at. The symbols move on with the child into the preschool room.

When I'm trying to settle children, I comment on their actions. For instance, I really like the way Julio is listening. He stopped running and he's ready for snack time.

## Proud to be...Preschoolers

Preschoolers increasingly display individual talents, strengths and weaknesses. They also begin to notice similarities and differences between themselves and others. Practitioners can foster children's confidence by emphasizing that being distinctive is positive and valuable.

### *Make choices available*

Creating an environment where age appropriate activity choices are available gives children the opportunity to follow their interests and discover new ones. A variety of individual, small and large group activities also promote children's ability to handle various kinds of social interactions.

### *Build on strengths*

Noticing individual children's interests and skills enables practitioners to incorporate new activities that further these interests. At the same time, children also need to know it is OK to make mistakes and that their efforts are worthwhile. Encouragement and praise about what they have done well helps children associate their efforts with positive outcomes.

### *Time and space*

Children complete activities at different paces and in different ways. Flexibility and advance notice about upcoming transitions gives children time to finish things that are important to them and to feel good about what they have done. Special areas to display their projects or store their belongings makes children feel they have their own space and that it is respected.

### *Let children have their say*

Create opportunities that allow children to share their own thoughts and experiences.

### *Know who the children are outside the centre*

By encouraging children to talk about their families and activities outside the centre, practitioners gain a fuller understanding about the children and what is important to them. Children also begin to see themselves as unique individuals in whatever setting they are in.

### *Celebrate similarities and differences*

Acknowledging and considering differences in a non-critical manner helps children to think in a fair and open-minded way. When practitioners model this approach in day-to-day activities, it encourages children to apply it in all contexts.

Accommodating some children is important at times. One child really fidgets during circle time. As a group we do yoga, which is really a challenge for this child because he can't sit still for long periods. Instead of expecting him to sit for 15 minutes, I expect him to sit for 3 minutes and then he can move on to other activities.

We write comment notes to parents each day about something special each child has done. Children see us writing the notes and ask about them. It's a chance to really emphasize positive things that are unique to the child. It's encouraging and reinforcing and most parents talk about the notes with their kids as well.

Each week one child gets to take home a stuffed pet from the centre. The child writes about the pet's stay at the child's home with his or her family and then shares what is written with the other children. Everyone has a turn.

I acknowledge and show interest in accomplishments children have outside the centre (e.g., dancing, hockey). Children show and share their trophies and medals with the other children in the centre.

Using comparisons. Once in conversation, a child said "I hate Americans" so I said "Well do you know that I am American?" The child responded with "You can't be. Canadians are the good guys". It started a discussion about how Americans are all different people with different opinions and that the child couldn't hate them all. Everyone is unique and must be respected.



# EXPRESSING EMOTIONS

At any given time at the centre, some children are relaxed and happy. They may be laughing, jumping or clapping. Other children may be upset or angry and may cry or act aggressively. Experiencing both positive and negative emotions is normal. Young children are learning about their own different feelings. Understanding and expressing these emotions constructively is critical to mental health promotion.

Learning about and communicating feelings is essential to children getting their needs met by practitioners, sharing their experiences and having healthy peer friendships. Practitioners help children find constructive ways to express their feelings and control their behaviour. They also help children become aware of other people's feelings and how to respond to them.

Regardless of children's ages, practitioners can:

- Label, empathize with and confirm children's feelings
- Model effective ways of expressing emotions
- Find out information about families' cultural expectations concerning expression of emotions and adjust practices accordingly

Frequently, practitioners use pictures to teach children about emotions, but it is often more important to highlight emotions in the context of interactions. As children develop more language skills, practitioners can have more extended conversations about the causes and consequences of the emotions the children are experiencing in particular situations.

## Positive Emotions

It may be tempting to believe that expressing positive emotions is just that, positive, and children do not need guidance. However, practitioners help shape how children show these feelings in ways that are enjoyable for everyone and suitable for the setting. Practitioners can also help children to become aware of what causes them to feel good and that they can take responsibility for creating positive feelings in themselves.

### Give emotions words

Labelling and describing children's feelings lets them know that practitioners understand their experiences ("Wow! You seem really excited and I can see that because you're jumping up and down"). Through this, children develop self awareness and make links between different emotions and ways of expressing them.

### Provide outlets for expression

Young children may want to express themselves in a variety of ways through body language, words or activities.



Always acknowledge children's emotions (e.g., sadness, anger). It's important to do this before you move on to anything else. It shouldn't be brushed aside. Children react more positively when people understand and are more willing to be open and talk about their feelings.

At times we need to realize that some parents don't want their children to be autonomous and openly emotional. One mother does everything for her three year old daughter and we noticed how the girl never asserts herself, complains, expresses frustration or shows how she feels. Even though we wanted to encourage the girl's independence, we started to learn more about their culture and found out that it's important for them to downplay individuality to strengthen the group and create strong bonds.

I'm careful not to hinder self-esteem when they are just learning about their own 'temperature'. It's OK to feel angry and I provide an appropriate outlet. It's about labelling the emotions and not the child. They need to experience both positive and negative feelings.

Some children need a means to release energy through outside play or in a gym area. Other children prefer low-key activities like drawing pictures about their feelings and accomplishments or creating facial expressions with eyes, nose and mouth on a felt board that can lead into a story.

### Recognize overstimulation

Assist and redirect overexcited children so they can express themselves in ways that are not risky or hurtful. Explaining why certain ways of showing excitement (e.g., running around, grabbing) may be harmful, and guiding children to a safe alternative (e.g., soft balls) can keep everyone in good spirits and doesn't spoil the moment.

### **Show children how to feel proud of themselves**

Label and encourage children's positive behaviour and accomplishments either with words or actions. Promoting children patting themselves on the back when they feel proud encourages them to recognize that they don't always need to receive praise from others to feel good; they can say "Wow I did a good job!" and be satisfied.

### **Encourage children to share their feelings**

Talking about each others' feelings lets children understand that everyone has a unique way of experiencing and expressing different feelings. It also encourages children to listen to and respect others.

We have a "Hop-Hop" song that we do and sometimes the children get overexcited and jump out of the circle around the room. To get them to come back I say "But others can't see your jumping!" It suggests to them that they'll get more attention if they come back.

If a child makes a tall building of blocks, I clap my hands, verbalize their accomplishment and look happy to encourage them to see they have done something positive.

## **Negative Emotions**

Young children often lack the words to communicate their anger, sadness or upsets. Instead, they rely more on actions to show how they are feeling. As children get older, they are better able to talk about feelings, but may have trouble doing so when dealing with topics that are emotionally loaded for them. All children experience negative emotions, especially as they try to assert themselves when they are interacting with others. Practitioners need to acknowledge children's emotions, help them figure out the causes and learn how to take control of the ways in which they express themselves.

### **Allow children to experience their feelings**

Children need to take some time to recognize what body sensations, thoughts and impulses come with emotions. It's OK to show negative feelings, but within limits so that someone will not get hurt.

### **Accept rather than judge**

Young children often don't understand ways to express their feelings. It's important to label their feelings, but just as important not to label the child. Make sure they know that they are liked regardless of the feelings they're expressing.

### **Role model**

Maintaining a normal voice volume, getting down to the children's level and making eye contact helps children feel understood and respected. Describe their behaviour and try to confirm their feelings ("You're stomping your feet. Are you angry?") and the reasons for them. By giving words to feelings and identifying things children need to express to get their needs met, practitioners show children how they can share what's going on inside them.

### **Promote thinking before acting**

Guiding a child through problem solving that involves talking about choices and possible outcomes helps them to deal with what may seem like overwhelming emotions.

### **Provide options**

When children express emotions in inappropriate ways, providing choices allows them more control over the situation. At times, children may need to immediately express their feelings in a safe environment before they can talk about them and deal with the situation. Some children may need a concrete physical release through:

- Pounding on playdough
- Drumming on metal cans
- Punching a pillow
- Throwing or kicking bean bags at safe targets
- Hammering into a board

Other children may prefer calming or soothing activities such as:

- Blowing bubbles
- Quiet, soft spaces to be alone
- Books and puzzles
- Talking through puppets

When a child is angry, I try to help them cool down first so then we can talk about it. We count down from 5, do deep breathing exercises and I help the child visualize the experience by saying things like "Your arms are like rocks, let's make them feel like spaghetti."

At our centre, we have a 'Happy Box'. Children put things in it every day that make them feel happy. Periodically, we all go over, open it and share the items (i.e., dolls, stories) with the whole group. The children have the chance to tell everyone why the items make them feel good.

At our centre, we have a Behaviour Chart that includes actions connected to children feeling angry or sad. There are 'Do's' and 'Don't's' in pictures listed for expression of different feelings. Children can refer to the chart by themselves or with a teacher. It promotes independence and self-control. It also takes the focus off the child and puts it on the paper.

# DEALING WITH CHALLENGES AND PROBLEM SOLVING



## Just Beginning... Problem Solving in Activities

There are bound to be times when children experience frustrations such as when they try a new activity. They might not be able to manoeuvre themselves physically or manipulate certain objects. Practitioners structure the environment to help children develop new skills. Children must feel reasonably challenged, just beyond their level of competence, but able to experience success with guidance and support.

### *Encouragement and praise*

Encouraging words and actions guide children through situations in which they feel uncertain. Praise that focuses on children's efforts as much as their accomplishments encourages them to continue to try new things.

### *Allowing challenge*

It is important for children to try new things, even though they are not always successful or able to do them well. Sometimes, practitioners need to step back and allow children to experiment.

### *Promote self-help skills*

Encouraging children to do routine, daily activities on their own enables them to gain skills that can be used in all settings. Children then learn they are able to meet some of their own basic needs. They also learn to assess when they need help, from whom, and how to ask for it.

We see that some children are learning new skills while others are engaged in projects that allow them to practice ones that are already developed. In social situations, some children work together well while others are just starting to understand appropriate ways to interact with their peers and practitioners. Mental health promotion involves helping children to feel competent in dealing with these challenges effectively.

Some stress helps children develop strengths. Practitioners meet children's needs but aren't overindulgent. For instance, if a child physically gets stuck somewhere, I give the child a chance to get out of the situation by himself. Stress gives children the opportunity to understand what their bodies are feeling, what emotions feel like. Sometimes I step back and don't help children. When they aren't sure what they want to play with, are fussing or tired, they may end up lying on a pillow and I let them experience that frustration and make their own choices.

We have practical life kits at the centre that children can experiment with. They're filled with everyday life things that toddlers usually don't get a chance to do independently, such as sifts for sand and water, measuring cups, eyedroppers for mixing colours, materials for shining shoes, and tweezers and eggs for fine motor development.

We allow the toddlers to be actively involved in class. They wash their own hands after snack, bring their bib and cup to the kitchen and help clean up. We try to make it a fun activity by singing songs while we put things away. But we also offer children the choice to participate or not through questions such as "Do you want to bring that cup here?"

At 15 months, we encourage children to feed themselves with a spoon. We use hand-over-hand techniques to help them practice. They wipe their own noses and wash their own faces. They also have their choice of when to have their bottles.



## Onwards and Upwards... Preschoolers

Preschoolers are increasingly more self-sufficient and many tasks and activities contribute to their self awareness and feelings of effectiveness. They are also better able to remember events and recall their successes and failures. These experiences affect children's willingness to try new things. Practitioners need to provide opportunities and feedback for children to safely and securely assert themselves.

### *Active involvement*

Having children involved in decision making provides opportunities to guide them through negotiating and cooperating in order to get what they want. This also demonstrates respect for their opinions and participation and helps them gain a sense of control and responsibility.

### *Flexibility*

Giving children freedom to improvise in their activities promotes creativity in problem-solving. It encourages children to believe that there are different ways to accomplish things. Offering children choices gives them a sense of control over consequences. However, it is necessary to limit the number of choices in order to prevent children from feeling overwhelmed by options.

### *Smooth transitions*

Leaving one activity and starting another can often be frustrating and stressful. Slow changes with a fun approach can ease children through transitions.

### *Clearly defined expectations*

Established limits and expectations about behaviour and routines enable children to move easily through daily activities. As well, when children feel secure and know what to expect, they can explore and take risks that result in new experiences and skills.

### *Recognizing value*

Asking children about what they are doing gives them an opportunity to recognize how they feel about and value different activities. This encourages children to develop their own opinions about their abilities and pursuits.



“One day I put out a cardboard sheet and paint. I thought it would be an art activity. Instead, the boys painted the plastic dinosaur toys we have and stomped them on the cardboard. Then they painted their hands and pretended they were monsters. I didn't try to direct them back to what I intended them to do. I supported what they wanted to do.”

“Children help decide on centre outings. We try to be democratic with lists and notes of their ideas and then take votes. They are also included in scheduling and rule-making. They help choose when and where circle time is held. It helps them feel independent and part of the whole experience.”

“Daily transitions times can be harried. After lunch, we give children round cookie boxes filled with toddler toys. It's the only time of the day they get to play with them. It makes it special and they don't get bored of the toys.”

“In some cultures, children are encouraged to be dependent and to allow adults to feed and clothe them. One consequence of this is that they may not want to help clean up in the playroom. The first time this happens I tell the child that he does not have to help but that he should watch. I try to make cleaning up fun and, for instance, may sing a clean up song. The next time I tell the child that I am going to help him to clean up. If a child does not want to clean up I understand that this may not be something that is expected at home and not that the child is misbehaving.”

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## DEALING WITH CHALLENGES AND PROBLEM SOLVING

### Problem Solving in Social Situations

Toddlers and preschoolers inevitably have conflict with peers. Young children are just beginning to express themselves with language and do not fully understand others' perspectives. When practitioners guide children through problem solving, they help them develop the skills to cope with and resolve their own problems.

#### *Get to know the whole story*

Gather information about the situation from everyone involved. Practitioners need to approach the issue calmly to help settle frustrated or upset children. They also need to stop hurtful language and actions.

#### *Identify the problem*

Clarify the issue or misunderstanding. Practitioners' words need to reflect everyone's perspective when a number of children are concerned.

#### *Discuss the experience*

Allow children to express their feelings about the situation. If two children are in conflict, encourage each child to communicate their thoughts and feelings to the other. This helps children feel that they are understood and can offer them relief from intense situations.

#### *Brainstorm*

Use open-ended questions to guide children to possible solutions. Encourage children to think problems through in a step-by-step way. This can make problems seem more manageable. If more than one child is involved, help children to think about the needs and feelings of their peers. Children are more likely to want to resolve problems when they actively take part in the problem solving process.

#### *Support solutions*

Acknowledge children's decisions and assist them with putting decisions into practice. Allow them to carry out their own solutions with reassurance that practitioners are there if they need help. Following up on solutions and providing positive reinforcement empowers children. It encourages them to use the problem solving approach in the future.

The focus in our guidance strategies is on: 1) respect for everyone involved, 2) raising the self-esteem of the children and 3) truly listening. This last part means giving my full attention to the children, being at their level, maintaining eye contact and not allowing other children to interrupt. I don't respond for a few seconds after they're done in case they have more to say. I repeat what they're saying and extend their language without coercing them into anything. If they agree with what you've said they let you know. It makes them feel important because they have adult acceptance. Then I have to respond to what they've expressed in a respectful manner."

"If children experience frustrations with themselves, I provide options to keep going if they're stuck on something. Breaking down the problem into smaller pieces helps children solve it and makes them feel like they've solved it. If children are frustrated with others, I try to verbalize everyone's perspective and encourage them to work things out together. They can either work together, sharing ideas or work alone on ideas and then share them with each other. I try to make them see it as a positive thing that they do have different ideas."



# RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER CHILDREN

The youngest children in the centre are typically playing with practitioners or by themselves. As children grow older, they more often play together. Practitioners have an important role in helping children gain social skills that contribute to their relationships with peers, another component of mental health promotion.

## Infants and Toddlers

Infants and toddlers tend to go about things without really interacting with their peers. They are not yet able to understand the thoughts and feelings of another child or adult. Especially with infants and toddlers, practitioners can:

### *Model kind and respectful behaviour with children and coworkers*

Being gentle, caring, helpful and respectful with others throughout the day gives children good examples of how to interact and encourages similar treatment from others.

### *Provide opportunities, not pressure*

Social behaviour such as empathy and sharing are not part of infants' and toddlers' developmental capacity and should not be expected. Practitioners can foster emergence of such behaviour in the way they set up activities and the centre environment and how they guide interactions between children.

### *Describe how children's actions affect others*

Infants and toddlers start to learn about how their behaviour can make others feel. If they learn about the consequences their actions have on others ("You threw the block, it hurt him and he's crying"), children begin to recognize that their actions don't have the same consequences for themselves as for others.

### *Encourage children to share their feelings*

When practitioners ask children about what they are experiencing, children begin to recognize that communicating their feelings assists them in being understood. Acknowledging and labelling feelings lets children know that their emotions are noticed and important. Giving children words to get what they want and express themselves also helps them start to recognize the importance of listening when interacting with others.

### *Promote children standing up for themselves*

Helping children to use words or phrases such as "no" and "I don't like" can prevent situations where they are hurt by others or have something of theirs taken by another child. Often practitioners focus on the child who initiates the harmful behaviour, but encouraging children to stand up for themselves is important too. It empowers them and gives them more control.



Children often get hit and say "It's OK" to the child that hit them. But it's not OK and I encourage the hurt child to say that.

When children start to ask about the physical differences they notice between themselves and others, I try to answer their questions in a positive way. If a child asks "Why are Limei's eyes weird?" I talk about how her eyes are different because different people have different shapes of eyes. I point out that Limei's parents are Chinese and many Chinese people have eyes like Limei. As well, I talk with the child about using the word 'weird' and how it can be hurtful.

I create games about taking turns. When having two toddlers build a block tower, I guide each child to add a block. I give them time and praise them when each adds a block. This also helps them to gain an appreciation for each other's accomplishments.

## Preschoolers

Preschoolers begin to build lasting friendships that are important to them. They better understand that cooperation and communication can help them get along with others. Practitioners can be active in supporting these prosocial skills.

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## RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER CHILDREN

### Promoting Sharing and Helping

#### *Teach ownership*

Helping children become aware of what belongs to them and what belongs to others promotes respecting the rights and possessions of themselves and others.

#### *Show children what sharing is*

Practitioners need to show and explain why sharing is important and how it can build friendships and make everyone involved feel good.

#### *Encourage children to teach and assist other children*

Letting children help each other (e.g., tying shoes, doing up zippers) gives them a sense of pride. It also encourages children to rely on each other and feel comfortable asking for help from their peers.

#### *Give responsibilities to children*

Allowing children to assist in tasks around the centre fosters their understanding of what it means to work together and how things run smoothly when people help one another.

Sharing doesn't mean I give it to you right now, it can also mean I give it to you when I'm finished. You have to wait your turn. A lot of times people say to children 'you have to share' but don't always explain what that means - a fair turn for everybody.

We have Care and Share charts for each child. We watch for children sharing toys, helping each other or cleaning up. They collect stamps and stickers of their choice for these types of behaviour. When the chart is full, children get to take it home and share it with their family.

I try to show by example. If children want me to help with a puzzle when I'm in the process of cleaning up, I'll say "I'll help you if you help me" and ask that they help me clean up some toys. It gets us working as a team.

Each activity area has a hook for children's name tags. Individual children have their own tag and when they choose an area they want to work in, they place their tag on the hook. But each area has a sign showing the maximum number of tags, or children, allowed at any one time. The children have to work together and keep track of how many are in the area.

### *Have open-ended conversations*

Practitioners can help children satisfy their needs and wishes by guiding children's discussions ("I know you want her car. What can you say to Emma?"). Encourage children to think of their own ideas rather than put words into their mouths.

### *Promote children problem solving together*

Group activities and projects such as murals and large puzzles offer opportunities for children to cooperate and make decisions together.

### *Provide physical features in the centre that help children work together*

Arrange the centre environment in ways that assist children in turn-taking and interacting cooperatively.

## Encouraging Empathy

### *Bring children's feelings to each other's attention*

Guiding children to notice facial expressions and behaviour helps them identify the emotions someone else is experiencing.

### *Get children's ideas*

Open-ended questions such as "How would you feel if..." and "Has this ever happened to you before?" gets children thinking about what their own reactions would be in similar circumstances. It also steers children to think of ways to make others feel better if upset or hurt.

### *Promote meaningful interactions*

Putting the focus on children assisting their peers in ways that they feel are useful and comforting fosters empathy and a desire to help peers.

We make a point at the beginning of the year of talking about what rules should be in place ("Should we hit each other?" The children's response is "Well, we shouldn't hit because..."). It puts the onus on them to explain reasons why they should treat each other kindly and express themselves. Then we can refer to it later on in actual situations.

I don't believe in making a child say 'sorry' because it's often not meaningful. The child is usually put on the spot. Instead I involve both children. I ask the child who has done the hitting for ideas about how we can help the hurt child. Then I ask the hurt child what would make him feel better. The hurt child is tended to by the other, often with something like having an ice pack brought to them and held to their hurt spot.

## Not All Alone... Shy Children

Sometimes in the centre we see one or two children who are not talking or playing with others. They may be 'slow to warm up' or shy. In larger groups of children, these shy children sit by the sidelines or look uncomfortable when they are participating. These children often need extra assistance from practitioners to feel comfortable with their peers and build relationships with them.

### **Establish trust**

Developing a connection with a practitioner helps a shy child feel someone is always available to them when they need it. The practitioner provides support and can gradually introduce the child to new children and activities.

### **Get information from parents**

Talking to parents about the child's likes, interests and routines gives practitioners ideas for conversations with shy children. It also enables practitioners to incorporate things the child likes into activities or the centre itself.

### **Follow the child's lead**

Using children's cues about what activities they want to join, how long they want to participate and when they want to end participation prevents them from feeling pressured or overwhelmed. Observing a child can also help practitioners find out reasons why the child doesn't want to enter into activities and modify situations so that the child feels more comfortable.

### **Involve them in important duties and tasks**

Having shy children act as classroom helpers or be in charge of certain activities boosts their pride and confidence. Commenting on children's strengths also draws peers' attention in a positive way.



### **Provide opportunities for success**

Choose an activity the shy child can do well and enjoys. After awhile, gradually draw other children into the activity or guide shy children to invite others to participate.

### **Partner with another child**

Teaming up shy children with consistent buddies encourages friendship and helps shy children enter into other social situations with support.

### **Get the group to empathize**

Encouraging the other children to imagine how shy children feel can lead them to ways to involve shy children.

*\*It's important to keep in mind that there may be other reasons why children appear to be shy. Some may be sad, while others may have problems with communicating because of language delays or because they have a different first language than that used at the centre. As a result, it's critical to share your perspectives with children's parents and help them find services, if appropriate.*

*'We set up a play date with another child. The two children have a special space to do an activity in and a practitioner guides the interaction.'*

*'I partner a shy child with an outgoing child with excellent social skills. I ask the outgoing child to help involve the shy child in activities. The children are at the same eye level, and more one-on-one than what's available with staff. This works especially well for children who share the same cultural background or have a similar language in common.'*

*'Rory the Lion' hides under a paper bag during a shy child's first day of care. We talk about how he's feeling shy and new to the group. Then he comes out and greets each child while singing songs using children's names. Later the shy child can hold Rory during group games if they're not participating.'*



# RESPECTING DIVERSITY

Within many centres, there is tremendous diversity in both children and practitioners. There are differences, for instance, in cultural, religious and socioeconomic backgrounds, range of family life experiences, and how they look and behave. Early childhood, especially between the ages of two and five, marks a time in which children became aware of gender, race, ethnicity, disabilities and other differences between people. Centres benefit from developing a culture of inclusion that fosters an understanding of and respect for diversity. This is another component of promoting mental health.

## Multiculturalism... Start With Yourself

In order to help children learn about and respect similarities and differences between cultures, it's necessary to appreciate how your own cultural background shapes your thinking and beliefs. Think about which of the following statements best describes your goals for children:

- |  |    |  |
|--|----|--|
| • Children being independent                                       | OR | Children being interdependent                            |
| • Children's learning focused on their individual interests        | OR | Children's learning focused on preparing them for school |
| • Open expression of emotions                                      | OR | Controlling emotions and being reserved                  |
| • Verbal communication is emphasized                               | OR | Multiple modes of communication are emphasized           |
| • Discipline that helps children gain self control                 | OR | Discipline that teaches children to respect authority    |
| • Practitioner-child relationships being more relaxed and informal | OR | Practitioner-child relationships being strict and formal |
| • Scheduled planning   | OR | Flexible planning  |

There are no right or wrong answers, but families of children in your centre, and other practitioners, may have made different choices. Respecting and acknowledging their choices is important.

## Including Multiculturalism Day By Day

While highlighting diversity through special events and theme weeks might help children learn about various cultures and religions, it is much more valuable if learning is woven into daily activities and conversations. By doing this regularly, children are more likely to believe different cultural perspectives are equal in worth rather than unusual and strange compared to their own. Practitioners possess their own cultural knowledge and can become familiar with other cultures through communication with families and by seeking out other resources.

### *Incorporate multicultural pictures, dolls, books, music and dramatic play items into the centre routines*

Providing experiences that use children's five senses is a concrete way to introduce them to other cultures even before they have the language skills needed to talk about them.

### *Get parents and families involved*

Invite parents and relatives to be guest speakers so that all children in the centre can learn firsthand about different cultures.

### *Discover if children identify with the centre*

Children should find their images, interests and experiences represented in the program and environment. Ask children about their favourite areas and whether they feel comfortable in various work and play places.

### *Support home language*

Find out if families want their children to preserve their home language. Incorporate some key words that families (even those that speak primarily English) use with their children during daily routines. Include labels and instructions around the centre in the alternate languages children speak. This creates continuity between home and centre.

In our centre, the majority of families are Inuit. One Inuit infant had difficulty sleeping at the centre, so we talked to the mom and found out about their practice of 'packing' children. The mother wears a parka with a deep sack that is meant to hold the child. It's important for these parents to keep the child close to them for the first two years. The child was used to sleeping in this way, so we actually incorporated 'packing' into her sleeping routine and she is carried around by one staff member.

### ***Let children be teachers***

Children themselves can show and explain their cultural practices to others. Listen to a child teach words from their home language or watch how they eat in different ways (e.g., using chopsticks).

### ***Share customs and celebrations***

Including holidays and special occasions from other cultures can help children recognize and appreciate that not all people have the same traditions and ways of life. Children, parents, and practitioners can share their own cultural practices that involve clothing, crafts and food. Talking about symbolic objects, important items and practices in different cultures allows children to see how these things translate into everyday life. It also gives children the chance to ask questions and get answers from someone in the know.

### ***Be flexible***

Willingness to modify and adapt to meet cultural or religious practices shows respect for children and their families. It also models to other children that particular activities or items are important to some children and should be valued.

### ***Connect with the community***

Going on field trips and using community resources exposes children to cultures that may not be represented in the centre.

## **Not Just Culture**

Aside from culture, young children begin to discover that there are differences among children and in family structures. When children start to notice that everyone is not exactly the same, it can be puzzling for them. Practitioners can promote children's respect for all people through their responses to questions and by actively bringing up similarities and differences in everyday conversations.

### ***Talk about differences respectfully and in a matter of fact way***

Always keep in mind the age of the children and use simple language they will understand. Try to promote children's understanding of differences in a way that helps them put themselves in another person's shoes. Speak about differences in a positive manner ("Joey walks more slowly. Let's wait for him so he can go out and play with us.").

### ***Discuss similarities and differences through group times and books***

Group times provide opportunities to encourage children to notice how they are diverse in appearance, clothes, the way they talk and who they live with at home. As well, they offer practitioners the chance to provide explanations to everyone in order to clear up misunderstandings and prevent misperceptions among children.

### ***Find out where children get their information***

Children's ideas and opinions may be influenced by a variety of sources such as television, movies and other children. Knowing what influences children's thoughts and behaviours can help practitioners decide on the best approach to dispell misconceptions. Practitioners can also work with families so they don't give contradictory messages at the centre.

### ***Counter stereotypes***

Respond to discriminatory comments immediately. Children may not intend to hurt others' feelings and may simply misunderstand unfamiliar or different situations. Make it clear that such comments are wrong and clear up inaccuracies. Help children think of examples of what might hurt their feelings and then what might make them feel good. Encourage children to see people as individuals rather than groups.

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"I'm from Sri Lanka. Before circle time each day, I do with the children what I would normally do if I was by myself. For several minutes, we meditate, sitting with our legs folded, our hands open and our eyes closed."

"We do Operation Christmas. The children put together shoe box packages for children in Guatemala with things like small toys, clothes, soap, combs, books, toothbrushes. After the gifts have been received, the children can watch a video that shows the Guatemalan children getting their presents."

"We have a boy at the centre who uses a cane. It was hard to explain to the children. I talked about how the cane worked and let the children touch it to understand, so they would not keep grabbing it."

"One child shared that he was adopted and had just found out. Another child said, "Oh, I thought you were a normal kid". The adopted child ran out very upset. I talked separately with each child. I asked the child who said that why he said it and it turned out he didn't even really know what adoption meant. He also didn't understand how his words would be taken by others. Then we brought the two children together to talk it over. Afterwards, we brought the whole group together because all the children had heard the original conversation. We explained adoption and everyone was able to ask questions. We also discussed the incident with both children's parents."

## RESPECTING DIVERSITY

### Understanding Families

Given the variety of family structures present in today's society, it is important for practitioners to adopt the perspective that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' type of collaboration with families. Children may live with single or step-parents, adoptive or extended families. Different situations can influence what parents need and expect from centres. As well, cultural and religious beliefs can impact how families relate to practitioners. When practitioners use multiple methods to find out about family experiences, they gain a better sense of how to work with families in order to make appropriate decisions for the children in their care.

#### *Identify family practices from the start*

Intake forms with questions about how parents identify their child's culture, how they like to describe their family to their children and others, traditions, holidays celebrated, languages spoken and foods eaten provide practitioners with valuable information that affects their interactions with children and families.

#### *Learn the best means of communication*

Practitioners need to find out how, when and with whom to build relationships with families. Some families may prefer to receive materials in a language other than English and/or live in a family hierarchical status that necessitates talking to only certain members about children. Technology has also expanded centres' options for keeping in touch with families through messages and images.

#### *Encourage continuous dialogue*

Effective discussions with families capture specific information about their culture, daily lives, family histories and genuine feelings. While it may be useful to start off with some direct questions, conversations may result in more information when talks evolve from parents' responses. Giving parents control over content helps create a balance of power between them and practitioners. Practitioners promote this when they:

- Ask for parents' opinions
- Express the desire to learn from families
- Clarify families' views
- Discuss ways to support family values
- Respect families' level of comfort in talking about topics

Geeta is a preschooler whose family recently moved here from India and lives in an area of the city where her family has been a target of harassment. Once during circle time, she saw a picture of an African-Canadian man and believed it was the person who stole her father's car. Using African-Canadian puppets and dolls, we talked with Geeta about the similarities and differences between her and them and she began to understand they had a lot in common. We also had some African-Canadian volunteers come in and work with us and Geeta was able to gain a different perspective.



Create a non-judgmental climate

Although practitioners may favor a particular style of child rearing, it's critical to recognize bias and be open to the different ways in which families wish to raise their children. Finding out about parents' own childhood experiences can help create a context for understanding their child-rearing method. One approach isn't necessarily better than another. If centres devalue skills and beliefs taught at home, children experience confusion and insecurity. Practitioners need to acknowledge that many points of view may be attached to topics.

Observe parents and children together

When practitioners gain awareness of how families interact, it can help them interpret parents' child rearing practices and the ways in which children relate to others.

Diverse Practices

Even if children share similar physical and cultural characteristics, they may differ in their preferred learning style. Many children learn best by using certain senses or skills (e.g., visual, movement) and some may prefer to first approach challenges with other children while others need to spend a bit of time alone on them. Practitioners need to recognize these differences in children and build on various modes of learning. Additionally, practitioners usually tend to favour a particular set of practices learned through their education or training. However it's critical to appreciate that the diverse child rearing beliefs result in a range of practices being appropriate.

Recognize parents' choices

Considering why parents decided to enroll their children into a particular program can influence a practitioner's approach to collaboration with them. They may want to focus on helping parents understand their choice if they settled on the centre because of its philosophy. Alternatively, if parents' choices were limited and they simply needed child care, practitioners' priority is to honor cultural differences while still maintaining program consistency.

Not Quality		Range of Quality		Not Quality
Practitioner does not plan any structured activities and children receive no intervention or attention.	Practitioner believes children learn best through child-directed play and occasionally extend play spontaneously or by plan.	Practitioner offers an equal balance of open ended play and planned learning experiences. Skills and concepts are taught in the context of play or more structured activities.	Practitioner believes children need to learn academic skills, sometimes using work sheets and taking an active role in teaching.	Practitioner has a strict schedule and most activities are structured and practitioner-directed.



# CHANGE AND TRANSITIONS

We've seen everyday situations that children experience at the centre with practitioners and peers. But major events and changes may occur in children's family lives as well as within the centre. In both situations, children may be faced with strong emotions and shifts in the people and activities around them. They may also feel uncertain about what to expect in the future. Enabling children to cope, adapt, and successfully recover from upsets is a way of promoting mental health.

## Change and Transitions in the Family

Young children may be confronted with a number of significant events that alter their daily lives, including:

- Parents' marriage, separation and divorce
- Death or loss of a loved one
- New siblings
- Illness
- Parents acquiring/losing employment
- Moves to a new home
- Moving to a new country

### *Open communication with parents*

Establish a centre environment that encourages parents to fill practitioners in on what's going on in children's lives outside the centre.

Discussions about what the circumstances are, what parents are doing and what parents would like practitioners to do helps ensure consistency in care and information shared with children.

### *Everyone's different*

There are both cultural and socioeconomic group differences regarding open communication between families and practitioners. Although practitioners encourage open communication, they also must realize that not all parents will be willing to disclose their circumstances outside of the centre.

Every child, family and situation is unique. Supporting children through difficult times requires practitioners to be flexible in the approach they take. Some children may need extra one-on-one time, while others want more space and privacy. Providing a variety of opportunities for children to express themselves respects their individuality.

### *Access resources*

Collecting relevant materials from books, organizations and other resources can help to plan an approach to dealing with major life issues. Such information can be used to educate and make suggestions to staff and parents, as well as to create activities and discussion for children.

### *Keep to routines*

Continuity and consistency reassure children that they have a stable base at the centre and lets them know what to expect when things outside the centre are more uncertain.



One mother is terminally ill with cancer. We've been more flexible with her regarding pick-up and drop-off times. We're trying to cater to the family's needs. The mother is coming in to talk to staff about her experiences and is giving direction on how to handle the situation with her child.

With new siblings, it's important to recognize that everyone is excited about it, but sometimes children feel like they are losing their center stage position. Centre staff try to be low-key about the situation and let the centre be the children's haven. We provide information to parents on how to handle older children and are also putting together a workshop for parents about this issue. We talk to the children about what they can do, what they can't do and their feelings about the new baby.

### *Review expectations*

Major life events can affect children in many ways. They may miss time at the centre, fall out of regular routines, have unpredictable emotions and be unable to manage things they usually do. Practitioners may see shifts in behaviour, sleeping and eating patterns, and toilet training, and need to be open to adapting centre schedules and the environment.



### *Help children help themselves*

Create opportunities for children to play out what is going on in their lives. This provides an emotional release and gives them a greater sense of control.

### *Use everyday scenarios to stimulate discussion*

Difficult topics need not be talked about only when they happen. Everyday activities can provide a context for discussion concerning major events and changes. This creates some understanding in children in a way that's less dramatic and emotional.

### *Think about the group*

Other children at the centre need to understand why certain children may act out of the ordinary and receive extra attention. Involving everyone gives practitioners the chance to answer children's questions and provide accurate information. It also encourages children to empathize and offer support.



We created a visit calendar with a child whose custody is between parents. It makes time more real and manageable. Occasionally, we also have the child make a card for the parent they're not staying with and mail it to them. We're positive about each individual involved and talk about how it's not the child's fault, or mom's or dad's. We always try to highlight that the child is still special to his parents.

The centre sets up housekeeping areas with baby dolls, accessories etc. that mimic the new sibling scenario to help children work through their feelings about it. Often, at home, children aren't allowed to touch these things.

If the opportunity exists, we can bridge topics like death to things that go on during the day at the centre. When a centre animal dies or we see something dead outside on our walk, we talk about it with the children. We write down the experience with them and it gives us a sense of children's understanding. Stories and discussions about something like a plant dying are not scary for the children to talk about because it's not personal.

One girl's grandfather died. Practitioners gave her lots of attention and the other children were jealous. Using books, we explained death to the children and talked about the girl's need for extra attention. We also discussed that it is OK to feel sad and upset.

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## **The World Out There**

Many external events can affect children. Children may hear about current affairs through family, friends and the media. They may not thoroughly understand information, but nevertheless be fearful or confused. There is no single way of dealing with such situations. What is important is to listen to children's particular worries and offer reassurance. It is also important for practitioners to seek outside resources as well as work together with other practitioners and parents to handle these topics consistently and sensitively.

After 9/11, the centre sent out a notice to parents on how to deal with the situation and answer questions coming from their children. Children were seeing the image over and over again on television. Staff had to answer questions that came up and discuss things that were confusing children from the media. It's important for staff to be aware of outside issues. The centre has no policies on how to handle these situations. As a centre, we also needed to reassure a lot of parents too. Many Muslim parents were concerned about how their children would be treated.

## CHANGE AND TRANSITIONS

### Change and Transitions in the Centre

For most children, the centre represents the first regular and recurring environment for them outside of their homes. They become accustomed and connected to the setting and people in it.

As a result, it's important for practitioners to assist children through transitions such as:

- Starting child care
- Changing child care arrangements
- Leaving child care to start school
- Saying goodbye to practitioners who leave the centre

#### *Slow and steady*

Gradual transitions that actively involve the children help them understand the changes taking place. When practitioners are flexible and allow children to make transitions at their own pace, it shows respect for children and increases their comfort level.

#### *Include parents*

Gathering information from parents about how they think children will adapt and what may help them can assist practitioners in developing transition strategies. In turn, providing information to parents and working with them during transitions provides children with extra support.

#### *Reassurance*

Emphasizing the positive elements of situations that children are transitioning into reduces fear, anger and sadness. It can build excitement and allows children to feel confident about new challenges. At the same time, children need to be reassured that it is OK to feel sad or angry.

#### *Establish regular routines*

Transitions are easier when a regular routine is quickly established in children's new situations so that children feel secure. Making things predictable gives them a sense of stability. They learn what to expect and come to feel comfortable.

#### *Keep in touch*

For children who leave, it's comforting to know they can maintain contact with practitioners and peers they grew close to at the centre, whenever possible. It also helps support remaining children who may have lost a friend. Keeping links to children who leave helps children still at the centre to understand the changes and transitions that await them.



When children move to the toddler room, they make small visits for a month, attending with their home staff from the infant room. The individual child is invited by their new toddler teacher to play. Gradually, parents start to drop off children at the toddler room at the beginning of the day. This helps the children understand that it's OK to be dropped off in the new room.

We talk about 'big' school. The staff take pictures of the school the child will be going to and share them with the group. As a group, we take walking trips to the school. We talk about new teachers and what they're going to do when they're there. Also, we write stories with them about the transition and the new school. It's an opportunity to get the child's ideas, correct and add on.

One child clings to her dad's legs and needs assistance to separate at the beginning of the day, even though she's been at the centre for awhile. Dad makes eye contact with staff to suggest it's time for him to go. Then he starts their routine. The girl is the 'Scoopier'. Dad says, "Here comes the Scooper!" and the girl makes scooping motions over to staff as she clings to his leg.

The centre has an observation room where parents can watch their child adjust and feel reassured at the start of care. It also gives them a sense of what works or doesn't work for separating. It calms parents down, which inevitably calms the child.

We take photos of each child with their parent. They're taken at the end of the day when they are being picked up and are happy. The photos are laminated and placed with Velcro on a felt board. Children can have the photo throughout the day as a reminder of being picked up.

“We get into a consistent arrival routine every day and request that parents do the same. It doesn't matter if it's 5 minutes or 20 minutes, as long as it's the same. One child's mom washed her hands for her every day at the centre before she left for work. One day she didn't and the child was upset all day.”

“Our centre has two large tree branches hanging from the ceiling with colourful special things attached. The things attached are seasonal, such as eggs during Easter time. When a child arrives, we take them over to touch them. It's the only time during the day they can do this and it makes it special for the child.”

“After a child has left the centre, we invite the child and parent back to visit and talk about their new experiences with the children. Children who leave also become pen pals. It keeps a connection.”

“Some children watch their parents leave from the window, others feed the rabbit, others go read a book. The transition is based on individual needs, but it's always the same routine every day.”

“There's a goodbye circle for children moving on. It involves reminiscing. It's good for the child leaving and for the children staying. It prepares them for when their own time comes.”



# RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

We may not see many parents at the centre.

For the most part, children experience child care independently of their families. Yet parents help shape their children's development at the centre through their own relationships with their children as well as through the specific child care arrangements they make. Optimally, parents select a centre that shares their child-rearing philosophies. They decide on centres that can provide the type of practitioners and activities they feel will meet their children's needs. To promote the mental health of children, centres need

to establish links between home and the child care setting. Actively involving parents and families in the centre in meaningful ways creates partnerships that benefit children. As well, constructive interactions between parents and practitioners can build parents' trust in centre practices and make them feel supported by the centre in their child rearing. In turn, practitioners can influence parents by supporting positive parent-child interactions and facilitating the way parents stimulate their children's development. Ultimately, this promotes parents' mental health, which has a valuable impact on their children's well-being. Also, as mentioned earlier, there are differences in families' willingness to disclose their circumstances that must be respected.



## Sharing Information

Communication between parents and practitioners is important. Information can be exchanged about children's home lives, centre activities, achievements, interests and challenges. Practitioners can also provide relevant developmental information to parents. Regular communication about children's experiences and behaviour ensures that parents and practitioners are kept informed about children's development. Given parents' various types of schedules and responsibilities, centres need to be flexible and creative in ways of communicating:

### *Communication during drop-off and pick-up times*

Greeting and talking with parents at the beginning and/or end of the day is an easy way to touch base. Parents and practitioners can exchange details about the children's current mood and activities.

### *Individual parent/practitioner meetings*

Private meetings offer the chance to discuss issues in-depth and confidentially without centre distractions.

### *Parent orientation*

Before children start at the centre, parents should visit and meet with practitioners. Having parents fill out child profiles that describe their children's personalities, behaviours, routines and interests helps centres to meet the needs and expectations of children and families. Practitioners may also benefit from visits to children's homes in order to gain understanding about their family lives.

When the child starts at the centre, parents fill out a child profile that covers physical and mental development, how parents deal with certain situations, the child's likes and dislikes, sleeping patterns and the discipline methods used. We can also ask in the registration package how parents would like to be involved in the centre. Parents go through orientation individually, so that the focus is on that one family and staff and parents can communicate. As well, we ask how they identify their culture and about their families' traditions such as what holidays they celebrate, what languages are spoken, and what foods they do and do not eat. We let parents know that there are children of different backgrounds at the centre and that their child may come with questions.

Through constantly talking with parents we've discovered that some families feel comfortable addressing us (practitioners) in different ways. Some prefer using our first names, while others, coming from more formal traditions call us Miss Singh or Mrs. Lopez. We've also been able to work with various family members to make labels in children's home language for classroom materials and include sections in the newsletter in several languages.

We do 'Talk About Cards' with the children. Staff and children sit down and write "Today at day care I did...", listing activities and routines. At the end of the day, we give the cards to parents.

### **Written feedback about children's activities**

Information written by practitioners about children's eating, toileting, napping and centre projects gives parents a sense of their children's day. They find out about their children's positive experiences and are alerted to possible difficulties or concerns.

### **Regular newsletters**

Special centre activities can be highlighted in newsletters distributed to parents. Upcoming events and requests for parent involvement can also be communicated.

### **Phone calls and notes**

Immediate issues are best communicated when practitioners and parents are able to phone each other or exchange written messages.

### **Parent information boards**

Centre schedules, information charts and notices can be posted in designated areas that are easily noticed by parents. Parents may also want to share information with other parents in this way.

### **Observation areas**

Parents may unobtrusively see how children behave in the centre environment through the use of one-way mirrors or videocameras. This can act as a springboard for discussion when there are concerns.

### **Family resource centre**

Materials concerning child development are easily accessed by parents through a child care centre library or information area. This gives parents access to resources that may otherwise not be readily available to them.

### **Parent workshops**

Useful developmental information can also be passed on to parents through workshops held at the centre. This promotes consistent practices between parents and practitioners.

## **Involvement in Centre Activities**

Creating opportunities for parents to see and participate in their children's centre activities gives them a better understanding of their children's experiences in child care. Centres also benefit when parents contribute their time, knowledge and skills and become involved in daily routines or special events. This creates a centre community that connects parents to practitioners as well as to other parents and promotes a shared sense of responsibility for children and the centre. Centres need to recognize both the unique qualities and restrictions of parents and try to find ways to involve them.

One parent was concerned that her son was too aggressive with other children. The staff invited the mom into the observation booth and found out he hit because younger children would snatch things away from him. This helped the mom and practitioners understand his behaviour. "Sometimes, we tend to be more reactive; we need to try to be proactive to find triggers and alter the environment to prevent challenges."

Sometimes I use my own personal experiences to open up a conversation with parents. One of our single mothers was having a hard time financially, although she never brought it up with us. Instead some of the things her son said at the centre clued us in. During a talk I was having with her at the end of the day, I was able to bring up my own history of being a single mom and the stresses that came along with it. The mom responded by discussing some of the problems she was having and it gave me a sense what the family was going through.

Parenting sessions are held once a month. The centre brings in outside facilitators and consultants to discuss topics like child guidance, nutrition and good parenting practices. Topics are chosen based on parents' expressed interests in questionnaires distributed at the start of the year.

The centre has monthly family functions such as "Imagination Market". Craft supplies are put out for parents and children to make things together.

Each parent has a mailbox where practitioners can leave messages and announcements for them. The centre also has a space for parents to sit down in the morning and have breakfast with their children at the beginning of the day. It's inviting for parents and helps relieve their stress during drop-off.

To raise money one time, the centre collected recipes from parents and put them together in a cookbook that the centre sold in the community.

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## RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

### *Parents volunteer opportunities*

Parents may work with children, do presentations, assist with field trips or help with centre operations and maintenance.

### *Crossover activities*

Practitioners can incorporate projects where children complete part of an activity at home with family members.

### *Parent group meetings*

Gathering parents together to discuss centre philosophies and functioning is a convenient format for addressing parent questions and pressing issues.

### *Family social functions*

Fun get-togethers strengthen relationships between practitioners and families by creating opportunities for people to get to know each other more informally.

### *Spaces for parents*

Specific centre areas for parents help them to feel they are welcomed and valuable members of the centre.



## Having a Say in the Centre

Parents can play a role in centre decision-making. Considering parents' input regarding policies, programming, equipment and materials enables centres to make choices that reflect the wishes and meet the needs of the families they serve. When parents' opinions and suggestions are used, they know the centre values their judgement and is actively trying to work together with them.. It also conveys to parents that centres are consistently striving to better their child care services.

### *Parent representatives on boards and committees*

Representatives can offer parents' perspectives on centre issues. This helps ensure that centres consider parents' interests in making decisions.

### *Parent focus groups*

Bringing together parents and practitioners to discuss centre practices and concerns provides an opportunity to brainstorm new ideas and solutions to difficulties.

### *Participation in fundraisers*

Parents may take part in centre fundraising strategies and assist with suggestions about and contacts with helpful resources.

### *Centre evaluations*

Parents' opinions about the centre can be confidentially expressed through surveys. This also allows centres to consider parents' feedback collectively.



# WHAT ABOUT THE WELL-BEING OF PRACTITIONERS?

Typically, centre practitioners are constantly in action. They try to make the days run smoothly for each child in their room as well as for the entire group. Working with children in this way is physically and emotionally demanding, affecting practitioners' own mental health.

How practitioners feel about their jobs and the centre they work at can affect the relationships they have with the children and the strategies they use with them. There is a high turnover rate of practitioners in many centres. When practitioners leave the centre, many children experience an interruption in the consistent care and education they receive from someone who knows and understands them. Also, co-workers may find themselves with extra responsibilities and decreased morale when members of their team move on. This too, can affect centre children. For these reasons, it is important to recognize that the well-being of practitioners is essential for the mental health promotion of children.



## Communication

Opportunities for practitioners to discuss both major and minor issues can lead to consistent practices being established and maintained. Practitioners feel supported and encouraged when they are able to share their experiences and exchange suggestions and feedback about their practices.

### *Regular staff meetings*

Holding routine meetings at convenient times for practitioners promotes attendance, positive attitudes and preparation. Room, age-group or entire centre meetings may be necessary to focus on specific and important topics. Copies of meeting minutes provided to practitioners keeps them up-to-date.

### *Communication books*

Places to write messages to co-workers allow practitioners to easily pass on information concerning staff, children and parents.

### *Open-door policy for supervisors*

Supervisors who are accessible to practitioners help create an atmosphere where staff feel comfortable asking questions and seeking information and feedback.

### *Staff representatives on centre boards/committees*

Representatives can provide practitioners' perspectives regarding centre functioning on boards and committees and share meeting discussions with other centre staff.

### *Informal conversation*

Encouraging practitioners to talk with each other during the day offers them the chance to discuss immediate concerns.

### *Staff newsletters*

Newsletters written by and for centre staff can include professional and centre information as well as more personal and fun topics.

### *Team building exercises*

Workshops for centre staff that focus on communication promote practitioners working together and dealing with conflicts respectfully. Cooperative centre projects involving practitioners provide opportunities for them to collectively plan and implement new ideas and events.

### *Social get-togethers outside the centre*

Opportunities for practitioners to socialize with each other encourage communication in a more informal way.

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With monthly staff meetings, each staff comes with 2 questions to be answered: 1) What can I do to make my day run smoother? and 2) What can the centre do to make my day run smoother?

We have a staff comments box. At staff meetings, comments from the box are read anonymously. We work as a team with the issues brought up.

Our supervisor sets amazing, positive examples. She never talks badly about others and gives us ongoing support and encouragement. With staff, she uses a problem solving approach, framing conversations with questions like "I heard what you said. Is there another way you could say that?" Directors and supervisors really listen to staff. It makes it more pleasant.

We have a 'Walking Club' with staff who have breaks together. They take a walk for 15 minutes during their lunch break. It's good exercise and a good opportunity to have time away from the children and informally vent.

## WHAT ABOUT THE WELL-BEING OF PRACTITIONERS?

### Working Conditions

Not only is the centre environment a place for the growth, care and development of children, it is optimally a place that meets practitioners' professional and personal needs. Considerations that enhance practitioners' contentment in the workplace increase their job satisfaction and support their mental health promotion practices with children. Features of the work environment that accommodate practitioners' responsibilities include:

- Salaries and wages that reflect practitioner training, skills and experience
- Individual/group planning time off the floor
- Flexible scheduling
- Regular breaks with opportunities to leave the centre
- Adult spaces with furniture and equipment suitable for off-floor work tasks
- Posted schedules for maintenance and rotation of staff duties
- A code of ethics for co-worker respect and conflict resolution
- Supervisors who provide leadership in terms of policies and programming as well as administrative centre functioning

Centres that invite practitioners to provide input into centre operations increase their sense of commitment and competence. Centres can include practitioners in:

- Decisions about policies and programming
- Room arrangements
- Equipment and material purchases
- Hiring and training new staff
- Evaluating supervisors and Board representatives
- Working with multidisciplinary professionals and specialists concerning centre children

Centres show respect and value for practitioners' work in various ways:

- Regular raises or bonuses when possible
- Yearly staff retreats
- Small gifts when staff go above and beyond the call of duty and for special occasions
- Annual staff recognition events
- Positive and constructive feedback and support from supervisors
- Acknowledging staff contributions in the centre newsletter
- Verbal praise during staff or board meetings and discussions with parents
- Appreciation bulletin boards with praise for staff and accomplishments



"We have room meetings every Friday. We often talk about difficult situations, go through each individual child's progress and family life and share suggestions for approaches."

"Staff have a fun time together. We do a Secret Santa-like activity every week. Staff have to buy or make something for a coworker for under \$1. Staff get very excited to come to work."

"Last Christmas the Director cooked for staff. It was a 1970's theme party and staff dressed up. It was a chance for staff to relax and be looked after."

"There was an ergonomic work station review done at our centre. It affected staff's choice of footwear. The centre bought sneakers and necessary supplies. They replaced small benches and chairs with exercise balls for staff to sit on. Children are able to play with the balls as well."

"Our centre held a back care workshop with a chiropractor. It was specific to child care. He made a video of the workplace and asked staff where specific concerns were. We learned good stretches and exercises and how to properly lift a child out of their crib and put them in a high chair."

"There's a computer in every class. This makes it easy to make notes about problems, conversations with parents, children's development, self-reflection and evaluation."

"The board comes up with centre goals for the next 5 years. Staff as a whole are involved in operationalizing that. We break staff down into small groups to deal with program components."

## Professional Development

Continued training builds practitioners' confidence in their work-related abilities. They gain new knowledge and skills for working with children. It also provides opportunities for career advancement. Professional development activities are especially effective when they combine theory with hands-on experience.

### *In-house training*

Workshops and guest speakers at the centre help to ensure that all practitioners receive relevant training.

### *Cover fees and accommodate time off*

Partial or full payment of tuition or fees for professional development and flexible scheduling adds incentive for taking part in extra training. It conveys the message that the centre values its practitioners gaining additional knowledge and experience and recognizes the benefits to the centre.

### *Post information about professional development activities*

Details about upcoming conferences and workshops can be discussed in staff meetings or posted in areas seen regularly by practitioners.

### *Find out about staff interests*

Surveying staff or discussing interests at staff meetings can help supervisors determine common issues for all practitioners and what professional development needs exist. Touching base to discuss personal goals helps supervisors match practitioners with professional development activities.

### *Resource materials at the centre*

Make resources easily accessible to practitioners through a library or specific area.

'Boosters' are included with our pay cheques. Staff are randomly chosen every pay cheque to receive a \$50 gift certificate for local stores.

Annual in-house conference. The morning focus is on personal and professional vision and development of the staff. The afternoon focus is on something more fun (e.g., yoga). It alternates between being more child focused and more staff focused.

Our supervisor adds a personal note to each week's pay stub. It has words of encouragement and details positive effort, strengths and appreciation.

Staff are able to fill out recognition forms regarding their coworkers' accomplishments. When they see coworkers handle situations well, they note what they observed and what the outcome was. Staff fill it out for each other incognito and then the sheets go into a draw at staff meetings for a prize.

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## WHAT ABOUT THE WELL-BEING OF PRACTITIONERS?

### *Sharing professional development resources*

Staff can share information from professional development activities at staff meetings. Presenting to coworkers can reinforce what the practitioner has learned and provide them with a challenging new responsibility.

### *Written annual evaluations by the Director*

Practitioners' individual strengths and struggles can be highlighted through regular evaluations. Follow-up discussions between practitioners and supervisors can identify goals for future training and experience.

### **Reflection**

Centres can provide ways in which practitioners have time to think about their work with children. They can also create opportunities for practitioners to learn from colleagues. This encourages practitioners to constantly consider their impact on the children as well as how the children affect them.

### *Journal writing*

Routinely recording different interactions, thoughts and feelings about children gives practitioners an outlet for expression. It can also be used as a reference when practitioners consider why certain strategies work well and how children are progressing.

### *Self-observation*

Cameras and microphones in the centre allow practitioners to view themselves with children. Practitioners are able to evaluate how they handle certain situations and modify their practices.

### *Visits to other centres*

Practitioners can gain valuable insight and ideas into children's mental health promotion by visiting other centres. Centres have diverse approaches to children's social and emotional development.

### *Mentors*

Experienced individuals from outside the centre can model, coach and encourage reflective practice. Practitioners may feel more comfortable in sharing their challenges with someone who is independent from the centre.

### *Co-workers as resources*

Individual practitioners have strengths and experiences in different areas. Sharing information among practitioners can lead them to adopt new approaches and ideas.

The centre has a fall breakfast called "Our Teachers are Stars Because...". Secret letters are distributed from the centre to parents requesting donations for staff gifts. Children fill out paper stars with reasons why their teachers are stars and we display them in the centre.



There's an annual self-evaluation. I sit and write down 5 goals for myself in the coming year and then talk them over with the Director.

I have my own journal that I keep in a little blue box on the teacher's shelf. I use it for ideas, feelings and as a stress reliever. I take it with me for planning. I always try to recognize that the children are teaching me about imagination and creativity; it's not just me teaching them.

Staff are encouraged to talk and collaborate with each other, especially older, more experienced staff with younger staff. For example, one teacher is good in planning, one is good at creativity, one in managing the group. They share experiences together.

# ENVIRONMENT

While the children at the centre have been the main focus, it is also important to look at their surroundings. The centre environment has a significant effect on promoting children's mental health by influencing what children do and how they build relationships with practitioners and peers.

## A Place for Children

The centre environment can support the kinds of positive social and emotional development outlined in other sections through:

### *Well-defined areas*

Having different activity areas exposes children to many kinds of experiences, fosters individual interests and talents and provides options for children to express themselves. Accommodating various group sizes of children promotes opportunities for sharing and working together.

### *Clear pathways*

Visible, divided spaces between activity areas allow children to move around easily, make transitions smoother and prevent interruptions. This promotes children's independence and self-control.

### *Child-sized furnishings*

Tables, chairs, toilets, sinks and shelves at the children's level reduces frustrations and promotes self-help skills. Children can master their environment and be active participants in centre routines.

### *Quiet spaces*

Children need places where they can go for privacy, either alone or in small groups. Soft colours, sounds and textures help these areas feel cozy. They offer less stimulation than the rest of the centre which can sometimes be overwhelming and stressful. Quiet areas may include:

- Books, puzzles, music, puppets and soft toys
- Mats, pillows and blankets and comfy seating
- Special, dim lights and curtains sectioning off the area

### *Active spots*

Children also need areas in the centre where they can release excess energy or relieve frustrations in a safe manner. These are areas where children have fewer restrictions on their physical behaviour and noise level.

### *Individual places*

Marked spaces for children to store their personal possessions, materials and projects gives children a sense of belonging in the centre. It also encourages respect for each other's property.

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We review room arrangements every 4-5 months at staff meetings. It's based on the characteristics of the group of children at the centre at that time. If an area is not being used, we move it or put something new in. The goal is to set up a stimulating, but not overstimulating, environment. They should be rich environments for children to explore and discover, with few restrictions. We're flexible about moving things from room to room as well. It makes it feel like a home away from home.

For preschoolers, activity centres are set up for a maximum of 4-5 children so they aren't overwhelmed by social interaction. Small, round, child level tables promote children looking at each other and talking.

The centre is large with lots of space per child. Having children crowded can be stressful for them. Play areas are divided by short walls and shelves, making them semi-enclosed to give a sense of privacy but other children and adults can see in. Having small groups encourages sharing and children are not continually frustrated by lack of materials.

Four foot walls divide areas. Within the walls, there are plexiglass slots so children can see into other areas. Crawling infants may not be able to participate in an activity that's too advanced for them, but they can still see the activity through the slots.

Some of our segmented areas change regularly and follow the interest of the children. Right now, one corner is an 'office' because some children are interested in what mom does at work.

Rooms are organized around children's sizes. We have little cube chairs for toddlers to sit in during lunch. They are physically able to get in and out on their own. It makes them feel competent and different from the infants. The art shelves are only 3 feet high and have see-through containers. It entices children to become engaged in learning. It also promotes children's decision making.

We have a fish tank at the centre's entrance. Often children start their day going over and looking at the fish with their parents.



## ENVIRONMENT



### Visuals

Posters and pictures can be displayed to illustrate important messages about children's diversity and social and emotional skills in everyday routines. Positioning visuals and projects at children's eye level increases accessibility and demonstrates respect.

### Good-bye places

Particular places for children and parents to start the day can facilitate transitions into the regular routine. This can contribute to predictability and consistency.

### It's The Practitioners' Centre Too!

The physical setting of the centre should also consider the needs of practitioners. In addition to supervising children, practitioners have other responsibilities such as preparing program activities and materials, recording children's development and holding meetings with other practitioners and parents. It is also beneficial for practitioners to have designated areas to unwind. Creating a setting that is attentive to practitioners' work and comfort needs promotes their job satisfaction and well-being. Practitioners' well-being is enhanced when the centre includes the following:

#### Staffroom

A room that accommodates practitioners' various work tasks away from children shows consideration for adult needs. Amenities such as a microwave, fridge and coffeemaker add to staff comfort.

#### Personal storage

Cupboards, cubbies and/or lockers keep valuable personal resources and belongings safe and organized.

#### Mailboxes

Individual spots for practitioners to receive notes and information from parents and coworkers increases communication as well as confidentiality.

The 'Mouse House' is a quiet area underneath some stairs. It has pillows, books, puzzles, pictures on the wall, a couple of chairs, hanging butterflies and soft things. There are different levels for different children and they can use folding screens for privacy.

The centre has a gymnasium downstairs. Children can use it to release energy, especially when they can't go outside. There are several climbing structures that are simple and low so that children can't get themselves into anything that they can't get themselves out of.

We have a room for dealing with children's physical awareness and stress. It's filled with sensory and motor activities such as electric toothbrushes, texture brushes, hand vibrators, trampolines, punching bags, bean bag chairs and other tactile activities.

To promote self-recognition, we have lots of mirrors around the centre and photo albums that are always available to children. Picture boards show the sequence of daily routines. It makes them visual and predictable for children. As well, there are gingerbread man signs posted at activity areas. The number of men shown represents the number of children allowed in that area. Children have to work it out themselves who stays and who goes. It gives them control over the situation.

Displayed art and photos show multiculturalism. Many include pictures of children helping each other and children experiencing various emotions. Different problem solving strategies are also shown, which is especially good when children are just learning language. The pictures express equality and cooperation.

In our 'Snoozelen Room' we have soft lighting and music, a tactile wall and bean bag chairs. There's lots of things to touch and feel. It gives children an opportunity to calm down and have one-on-one time with a practitioner after separation from their parent. Sometimes parents join their children in the room at the beginning of the day.

There's a good-bye window in the centre for children to see their parents leave and wave goodbye. It's located in a little loft with a step for children to climb up. It's the only time of the day children are in this area and it makes it special.

# GUIDING PRACTICES

Throughout this booklet, we've talked about specific practices practitioners can use to promote children's mental health. In order for these practices to be implemented consistently and effectively, it is recommended that centres set overarching centre policies and philosophies that reflect the expectations the centre has about how to work with children. Not only do these ensure good strategies for children's health and safety, they outline approaches to foster social and emotional well-being. As a whole, the centre can create an atmosphere that emphasizes mental health promotion.

Policies and philosophies can have a positive impact on practices and children when they are:

- **Clear** - describing specifically the views and methods implemented and prohibited in the centre
- **Inclusive** - involving the rights and treatment of children, parents and practitioners
- **Widely-Known** - understood by and available to practitioners and parents
- **Reflective** - considering the particular needs and situations of families the centre serves
- **Reviewed** - re-examined on a regular basis and adapted to reflect up-to-date knowledge in the area and meet the interests of people involved with the centre

## Clear Policies for Everyone

Centres' overall perspectives about children help to set guidelines for practices that promote mental health. Guidelines that have enhancing children's well-being as the ultimate goal address the different individuals involved in the centre and outline how the centre considers and supports children, parents and staff.

## Children

### *Gradual entry*

Orientation sessions for parents and children familiarize them with the centre. Having parents attend the centre for the first few days with their child increases the comfort level of both. It also provides an opportunity for parents and practitioners to develop a relationship.

### *Primary caregivers*

Assigning individual children to one practitioner builds trust. It also provides opportunities for practitioners to learn about the children's individual characteristics.

### *Inclusion and anti-bias*

All children and parents should be respected. The culture, religion, ability, beliefs and language of all children and parents needs to be recognized, valued, accommodated and encouraged.

### *Documenting development*

Observing and recording children's behaviour enables practitioners to build on children's strengths. It also allows them to identify needs and challenges as well as modify and change practices that are not effective.

Our philosophy is that the centre is a community of children, parents and staff. Children are cared for, nurtured and respected. Everyone is considered a valued and respected member of the centre. It also discusses how the richness of the program is a reflection of the community and the uniqueness of each centre member.

The centre has a 'Bill of Rights' for children, parents and staff. It outlines how to treat one another and use words, not hands.

Our family handbook manual describes how the centre supports all areas of a child's development, including social-emotional development, which underscores everything else. There are sections dealing with gradual entry, separation anxiety, beginning positive relationships between staff and child and accommodating programs according to the child's individual pace.

With our gradual entry policy, parents and children start off with small visits to the centre, slowly building up the length. Parents stay with children in the beginning, but, over time, they begin to withdraw, going from a full visit with the child to leaving the centre for awhile or staying half the time. Eventually, the child comes for a full day on his own. The length of this process depends on the individual child and parent. It builds trust and respect between everyone involved. As well, it cements the relationships and communication between staff, parents and children.

We work from the belief that all children deserve to be in an environment that fosters success and self-esteem. All have an unconditional opportunity to laugh, play and share with friends while in the program. Building children's social skills such as communication, sharing, cooperation, friendship building, conflict resolution, dealing appropriately with emotions, healthy self-esteem and confidence are all part of the centre's stated goals.

## GUIDING PRACTICES

### *Behaviour guidance*

Methods of dealing with inappropriate behaviour need to preserve children's dignity and self-esteem. Teaching children rather than punishing them fosters confidence and self-control.

### *Positive practitioner approaches*

Recognizing and reinforcing the positive things that children say and do helps them feel valued and secure.

### *Preparation for transitions*

Establish a process involving practitioners, parents and children when children make transitions (e.g., room transitions) to lessen surprises and stresses for children.

## Parents

### *Respecting parents as primary caregivers*

Family-centred philosophies reinforce the family as the primary influence on children's development.

### *Open-door policy for parents*

Welcoming parents into the centre provides them with the chance to view or participate in their children's program and work with practitioners. This contributes to parents' feeling that they are part of the centre.

## Staff

### *Staff qualifications and defined roles*

Clear hiring criteria for practitioners increases the likelihood of new staff sharing the centre's philosophies. Having job descriptions in place establishes practitioners' roles and following of centre expectations.

### *Staff treating children the way they want to be treated*

Policies highlighting how practitioners can be positive models helps them become aware of the impact of their words and behaviour on children. It also sets the standard for practices that support children's social and emotional skills.

### *Teamwork*

Encourage practitioners to work together effectively to promote children's mental health. Guidelines for conflict resolution and ethical practices among practitioners leads to mutual respect among practitioners and enables them to focus on the best interests of the children.

The centre priorities concern prevention and reinforcing children's positive behaviour rather than "sit still and keep your hands to yourself." It focuses on creating opportunities for children to utilize problem solving approaches.

Our guiding principles discuss how the centre complements the home, but doesn't replace it. The focus is on looking at the family as being the most important people in children's lives. The centre supports the family's role and decision making. It promotes practitioners working to recognize the uniqueness in each family with regards to things like culture and coping strategies.

One of the centre expectations is hiring people who genuinely care about and respect children and who can translate that into action. We have special questionnaires when hiring staff to ensure that practitioners share the centre's philosophy.

Our centre created a mentorship program for new practitioners. The infant age group can be particularly intimidating for new staff and many new practitioners seem less certain about practices geared towards the younger children as compared to the preschool and school-age children. We pair the new practitioner with a skilled staff person for 2 months to see if the infant age group is the one they work best with. It also provides a good introduction to centre policies and practices.



# DAY CARE CENTRE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## **British Columbia**

Cariboo Child Care Centre, Kamloops  
College of New Caledonia Demonstration Day Care Centre, Prince George  
Grandview Terrace Child Care Centre, Vancouver  
Langara Child Development Centre, Vancouver  
Plum Blossom, Vancouver  
Simon Fraser University Child Care Society, Burnaby  
University of British Columbia Child Care Services, Vancouver  
West Wood Players Ltd., Port Coquitlam

## **Alberta**

Churchill Park Child Development Centre, Calgary  
City West Day Care, Edmonton  
Edmonton Northwest Child Care Centre, Edmonton  
Fulton Child Care Association, Edmonton  
Jasper Place Child and Family Resource Society, Edmonton  
Louise Dean Child Care Centre, Northwest Calgary  
Marlborough Day Nursery, Calgary  
Primrose Place Family Centre, Edmonton  
Red Deer Day Care, Red Deer  
Southview Child Care, Edmonton

## **Saskatchewan**

Children's Choice Child Development Centre, Prince Albert  
Families First Child Care Centre, Saskatoon  
Kidzone Child Care, Regina  
MacKenzie Infant Centre, Regina  
Meadow Lake and Area Play Corner Centre, Meadow Lake  
SIASST Children's Day Care Centre, Regina  
Southwest Day Care Centre, Southwest Moosejaw  
Wascana Day Care, Regina  
YWCA Child Development Centre, Saskatoon

## **Manitoba**

Care-A-Lot Nursery Inc., Winnipeg  
Discovery Children's Centre Inc., Winnipeg  
Knox Day Nursery, Winnipeg  
Morrow Avenue Child Care Program for Families, Vital  
Sunnyside Child Care, Winnipeg  
Univillage Student Day Care, Winnipeg

## **Yukon**

Ashea Day Care, Whitehorse  
Child Development Centre, Whitehorse  
Creative Play Day Care, Whitehorse  
Dluwkat Hit Day Care, Teslin  
Nakwaye Ku Child Care Society, Whitehorse  
Tri'inke Zho Day Care, Dawson City

## **Northwest Territories**

Northern Tikes Association, Yellowknife  
Women's and Children's Healing and Recovery Program/Child Care Centre, Yellowknife

## **Ontario**

Cardinal Leger Child Care Centre, Scarborough  
Guildwood Child Care Centre, Scarborough  
N'Sheemaehn Child Care, Scarborough  
Owen Community Child Care Centre, North York  
St. Bede Child Care Centre, Scarborough  
Sunnybrook Creche, Toronto

## **Quebec**

Centre de la Petites Enfants Les Bois Verts, Montreal  
CPE Dorval, Dorval  
CPE St. Mary's, Montreal  
McGill Community Child Care Centre, Montreal  
Royal Victoria Hospital Child Care Centre, Montreal  
Saint Andrews Early Childhood Centre, Westmount  
West End Day Care, Montreal

## **New Brunswick**

Chatham Day Care, Miramichi  
Energi Centre, Val D'amour  
Garderie ABC Day Care, Moncton  
Kindertots Children's Centre, Miramichi  
Saint John YMCA Child Care Centre, Saint John

## **Nova Scotia**

Apple Tree Landing Children's Centre, Canning  
Bell Road Child Care Centre, Halifax  
Boys and Girls Club Child Care Centre, Yarmouth  
Children's Place Day Care, Antigonish  
Cobequid Children's Centre, Lower Sackville  
Creative Approach Preschool, Halifax  
East Preston Day Care Centre, East Preston  
Playschool Day Care, New Waterford  
Point Pleasant Child Care Centre, Halifax  
Sydney Day Care Centre, Sydney Cape Breton  
Town Day Care, Glace Bay  
Wee Care Developmental Centre, Halifax

## **Newfoundland**

College of the North Atlantic Children's Centre, St. John's  
Creative Beginnings Child Care Centre, St. John's  
Daybreak Parent Child Centre, St. John's  
Fisher's Children's Centre, Cornerbrook  
The Children's Centre, St. John's

## **Prince Edward Island**

Campus Kids Child Care Centre, Charlottetown  
Child Development Centre, Charlottetown  
Magic Moments Child Care Centre, Tignish  
Montessori Kindergarten and Nursery School, Pool's Corner  
The Kid's Place, Summerside

## NOTES

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## NOTES

This image shows a full page of blank white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for writing or drawing. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.



## NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

## NOTES

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