



CMEC Early Learning and Development Framework





Introduction

In April 2008, CMEC release *Learn Canada 2020*, a joint ministerial statement that underscores provincial and territorial responsibility for four pillars of lifelong learning:

- early childhood learning and development
- elementary and secondary schooling
- post-secondary education
- adult learning and skills development

Since then, provincial and territorial Ministries of Education have assembled through CMEC to focus on the early childhood learning and development pillar of CMEC's *Learn Canada 2020* framework. Inter-jurisdictional collaborations have included knowledge-sharing and the release of CMEC's *Statement on Play-Based Learning* in June 2012 (see page 18). The statement on play was the first phase to developing a comprehensive pan-Canadian approach to early learning. It endorses play as the mode of learning for children based on evidence from diverse fields of study. The statement also reflects the growing commitment in Canada to provide quality early learning experiences for children and their families.

The research on brain development noted in the *Statement on Play-Based Learning* also reveals significant implications for learning development from childhood to adulthood. Since the interplay between learning and development cuts across social, emotional, physical and cognitive domains, these fields help to inform all areas of education: from teaching and learning approaches to policies for healthy, safe, inclusive and accepting school communities. The research and evidence from early childhood education and care can help inform education policies for all children, creating alignment and coherence across systems to support children's learning and development along a continuum.

Based on this current research—much of it already embedded in the early childhood education and care policies and programs of many Canadian jurisdictions—the CMEC Early Childhood Learning and Development Working Group has developed the *CMEC Early Learning and Development Framework*. This framework, which builds on provincial/territorial objectives and the pan-Canadian approach to early learning and development, provides guiding principles for education policy and curriculum to support the development of quality early learning programs. It also identifies areas for future consideration.

This framework is designed to be relevant for use in both French and English contexts across Canada. Jurisdictions are invited to use this framework as a starting point for their own policy and program development and personalize it with their own terminology.

Defining early learning

Early learning applies to programs for children from birth to age eight and includes:

- programs for children before they enter formal environments—such as schools, child care, nursery schools and programs for children and families
- kindergarten programs within the school system (which may or may not be mandatory across jurisdictions) that serve as a bridge to formal schooling
- early primary school classrooms

Recognizing that programs are often governed, operated and delivered differently across jurisdictions and through various departments and ministries, this framework focuses on how education can support the continuum of learning and development programs for children—in particular, those who are in kindergarten and early primary—drawing from research and experiences in early childhood education and care.

Purpose

The purpose of the *CMEC Early Learning and Development Framework* is to:

- present a pan-Canadian vision for early learning, to foster continuity across jurisdictions and across all settings that provide education and care for children from birth to eight years of age, including preschool and formal schooling environments
- provide common understandings of a continuum of learning and development and shared values regarding what is most important in the early years
- serve as a resource to support decision-making and the development of policies, initiatives and learning approaches by Ministries of Education and their early childhood education and care partners that enhance the quality and continuity of experiences for children and their families in the early years and beyond

Early years research

The early years are a period of intense learning and development, when tremendous changes occur in the brain over a short period of time. In the first year, the architecture of the brain takes shape at an astounding rate—about 700 new neural connections are being built per second. Scientists now know that this process is not entirely genetically predetermined, but rather, is dramatically influenced by children’s early experiences with people and their surroundings.¹

This influential period is also characterized by the unprecedented growth of physical, social, emotional, cognitive and communication capacities. During the early years, children develop dispositions and skills for lifelong learning. Processes of learning that children practice through play and inquiry in the early years (the “how”) support the development of capacities they will need to later understand complex concepts (the “what”) and continuously apply past learning to new contexts.²

¹ Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2009). In Brief: The Science of Early Childhood Development. Cambridge, Ma.: Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University. Retrieved from: <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/>.

² Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (2011). Building the Brain’s “Air Traffic Control” System: How Early Experiences Shape the Development of Executive Function: Working Paper No.11. <http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu>





Beyond academic achievement, experiences in the early years strongly influence the achievement of social and economic success, as well as the ability to contribute constructively to the community. Studies show that positive early experiences lead to improved determinants of health, resulting in fewer instances of depression and better health outcomes throughout life.

In addition, the economic benefits of investments in the early years are well-documented. For example, economist and Nobel laureate James Heckman calculates a seven-to-one dollar return on public investment in programs for young children.³

CMEC commitment to quality early learning and development programs

The extraordinary and long-lasting impact of experiences in the early years requires access to high quality programs that are provided consistently across both the early childhood education and care and education systems. In addition, blending programs of knowledge from these sectors, aligning pedagogical approaches and creating a shared understanding of early learning and development will help strengthen the capacity of educators system-wide to deliver programs in which children thrive.

The following principles set out a shared understanding of children's learning and development for children from birth to eight years old. They are based on evidence from diverse fields of study and support continuity of approaches and connections across early years and education settings and will serve as a guide to policy and curriculum development and, ultimately, help support children's transitions into school.

“The Accord on Early Learning and Early Childhood Education acknowledges the importance of the early years in shaping children’s lives. The Accord highlights principles and practices that focus on the achievement of all children, and the responsibilities education faculties have for improving and advocating for education for preschool and primary children. The Accord also recognizes and respects educator knowledge and decision-making as vital to educational effectiveness for early learners.”

The Association of Canadian Deans of Education
Accord on Early Learning and Early Childhood
Education (2012)

Many of these same principles also hold true for education beyond the early years. Critical skills for the 21st century include creativity and imagination, problem solving and critical thinking, communication and collaboration—these desired capacities are keys for success throughout school and life.⁴ In addition, core competencies also include personal/social awareness, ethics and responsibility, as well as awareness of one's positive personal, cultural and linguistic identities. These same capacities are rooted in children's play. Application of the principles that inform early years pedagogy hold significant promise for education beyond the early years, informing policy and curriculum across each of the pillars of education, through elementary and secondary schooling, postsecondary education and adult learning.

³ Heckman, J. (2008). The case for investing in disadvantaged young children. In First Focus (Ed.), Big Ideas for Children: Investing in Our Nation's Future. Washington, DC: In Focus. pp. 49–58.

⁴ Fullan, M. 2012. Great to Excellent: Launching the Next Stage of Ontario's Education Agenda.



1. The child is integral to policy and program development

Children should always be at the centre of decisions about early years programs. Understanding a child's capacity to learn helps guide policy and program development. When children are recognized as intelligent, capable and curious, then programs will be more likely to build on their strengths, abilities and interests.

Provinces and territories describe children as unique, active learners, creative, curious, natural explorers, playful, competent, expressive, knowledgeable, joyful, capable of complex thinking and rich in potential as contributors to society.

Articulating a shared understanding of children and how they learn—and using this understanding to shape systems, policies, curriculum and practice—is critical to ensuring continuity and quality across all early learning settings and at all levels of the system.

- How can this understanding be used to examine existing policy and to shape new policy and develop curriculum? What incongruities currently exist?
- What strategies can be put into place to build a shared understanding of children and continuity of learning and development across all levels of the early learning system?

“A child learns by exploring, interacting, observing, imitating and listening: the child's thoughts are structured on the basis of what the child sees, hears, touches or feels and on the basis of the relationships that the child has with the adults and children around him or her.”

Meeting Early Childhood Needs: Québec's Educational Program for Childcare Services (2007)

“In putting forward an image of a capable child, full of potential, it is recognized that children differ in their strengths and capabilities, and that not all children have the same opportunities to develop their potential. However, a strong image of the child can inspire people who interact with children to promote their individual strengths, and to address conditions in children's environments—locally, provincially, and globally—that constrain opportunities to engage fully in early learning.”

British Columbia Early Learning Framework (2008)



2. The family as central to a child's development

A parent is a child's first and most important teacher. Parents are responsible for the health and well-being of their child. They nurture the balanced development of the child's mind, body and spirit. Parents set expectations, nurture curiosity and cultivate discipline and a love for learning. They provide insight into the values and customs of the family, their child's characteristics, interests, preferences and habits. Welcoming participation of families in all areas connects them to their child's early development and enhances the child's learning. By working in partnership, families and educators can learn together and gain a deeper understanding of each child and ways to promote his/her learning and development.

It is vital that families, including extended families and caregivers receive the full range of support services available in their communities to help them provide nurturing and healthy environments for their children. For some families who are also trying to deal with the stressors of poverty, illness, settlement and inadequate immediate family support, these networks of extended supports are particularly important.

Establishing reciprocal relationships with families and building connections with community programs (for example, public health supports, before and after school care) help to create optimal conditions for children's learning.

“Establishing a relationship of trust allows parents and educators or home childcare providers to appreciate one another, to recognize their respective responsibilities and to lend one another support.”

Meeting Early Childhood Needs: Québec's Educational Program for Childcare Services

“Children's best interests must be understood in the context of their dynamic relationships with families, communities, languages and cultures.”

New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care

- How might parent engagement strategies in early childhood programs align with those in school?
- What can education learn from the early years sector in terms of valuing families as children's first teachers and nurturing meaningful, reciprocal relationships?
- How might parent engagement strategies in early childhood programs influence and transform those in school?

- What policies in education would encourage reciprocal relationships and ensure that the education sector strengthens relationships with families?
- What policies, legislation and regulations could support continuous programming to ensure optimal conditions for children’s learning and a more coherent system for families (for example, access to quality before and after school care, providing seamless transitions before and after school care, providing seamless transitions as children enter formal schooling)?

“North American research on child development suggests that in order to establish a secure foundation to explore the world, infants and young children need to form a strong attachment to their primary caregivers. Strong attachments give young children the confidence they need to form meaningful connections with other children and adults, and with places and things in their communities.”

British Columbia Early Learning Framework (2008)

3. Honouring the diversity of children and families is integral to equity and inclusion

Children should be recognized as citizens with equitable rights to live and learn in society. Their powerful drive to learn and to belong is inextricably linked to their emerging identities as members of social, cultural, linguistic, economically diverse and geographic communities. Language and culture are important elements of children’s unique identity and programs should promote a sense of pride in their linguistic and

“We must honour diverse family circumstances, languages and cultures.”

“Paying close attention to the sites of difference is requisite to ensuring equitable opportunities for all children. We emphasize the need for a curriculum that is responsive to differences, with the capacity to provide additional support as required to ensure each child’s right to full participation.”

“Children’s best interests must be understood in the context of their dynamic relationships with families, communities, languages and cultures.”

New Brunswick Curriculum Framework for Early Learning and Child Care

cultural heritage. It is recognized that for First Nations, Métis and Inuit (FNMI) children, early years success is directly linked to early cultural, family and community experiences and exposure to their first language.

It is also recognized that Franco-Canadian families and their children living outside Quebec require French language and cultural elements for quality early learning and development programs.

As stated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, children should experience conditions that “ensure dignity, promote self-reliance and facilitate active participation in the community.”⁵ Inclusive programs ensure every child is able to participate and recognize his or her physical, intellectual, spiritual and creative abilities and potential.

⁵ UNICEF IRC 2006. The Convention on the Rights of the Child. Part I, Article 23. Retrieved from: www.unicef-irc.org/portfolios/general_comments/GC9_en.doc.html





Recognizing and valuing children's unique identities and capabilities strengthens their understanding and acceptance of differences, promotes cooperative and empathetic interactions, and enhances social and emotional well-being.

- What policies and strategies are needed to support early learning settings in recognizing, valuing and viewing the diversity of children and families (for example, honouring linguistic, cultural and varied experiences and abilities) as an asset to enrich the environment?
- How can education work with early learning and development settings to ensure continuity of experiences, supports and services for children and families as they move into the primary years of the education system?

4. Safe, healthy and engaging environments shape lifelong learning, development, behaviour, health and well-being

Environments and experiences that address the holistic way children develop and learn are essential for children's emotional and physical health and well-being, social skills, self-regulation and creative capacities, intellectual and spiritual growth.

Beautiful, joyful environments that are rich in opportunities lead to in-depth exploration, play and inquiry, and enhance holistic development and learning, health and well-being. Attention to healthy lifestyles throughout the environment and daily experiences influence lifelong patterns of healthy eating, physical activity and one's ability to cope with stress.

Environments for learning encompass more than just the layout of the physical space. They also include the aesthetics of the space (how the space appeals to the senses), the organization of time, the materials and furnishings, and the ways they promote children's independence, mastery and a sense of competence.

When educators allow children to participate in shaping their environments they gain greater insights into children's unique characteristics, abilities and what they are curious about. Through their contributions, children see themselves and their families reflected and are more fully engaged in exploring and learning about the world around them. They also have more opportunities for collaboration, negotiation and gaining an understanding of multiple perspectives.

“Children’s development depends on warm, nurturing, caring and consistent experiences.”

PEI Early Learning Framework: Relationships, Environments, Experiences

“Children experience healthy, inclusive and safe settings that enhance their learning and well-being. Children see themselves reflected in flexible environments that stimulate communication, invite questions, encourage investigation and promote exploration.”

Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide – Saskatchewan

“Natural environments also provide the perfect setting for holistic learning.”

British Columbia Early Learning Framework

- How can education ensure school classrooms and outdoor areas provide environments that enrich holistic learning and invite children to participate in shaping their learning?
- What are the implications of the above commitment on education policy, legislation and regulation?
- Do current policies, legislations and regulations present any limitations to learning environments?
- How can education incorporate approaches from early years pedagogy such as play and inquiry into policy and curriculum that is based on the learner's questions, ideas and theories about the world around them, as foundational for development of skills such as literacy/numeracy and the development of competencies such as critical thinking, creativity, personal/social awareness, communication, problem solving and positive personal/cultural identity?

5. Learning through play capitalizes on children's natural curiosity and exuberance

In playing, children are having fun. Play is the natural way a child learns about his or her surroundings. When children are *playing* they are *learning*. The positive emotions associated with play are as important as the skills they build while creating a disposition that embraces the joy of learning. Through play, children expand social and cultural understandings, express thoughts and feelings, advocate for their own points of view and learn to respond to and respect other people's perspectives. They practice flexible and divergent thinking, encounter and solve problems, and develop self-regulation skills. Children's play is representational and provides the foundation for literacy and numeracy.

As children explore with their senses, bodies and minds, investigating their questions and ideas, developing and testing theories about the world around them, they are building capacities for critical thinking and reasoning, creativity, and imagination. These skills are essential for school success across subject areas from science to the arts. It is the role of the early learning and development educator to observe and document the learning from children's play as well as to serve as facilitator and provocateur of their learning.

“Giving children opportunities to choose and direct their play experiences empowers children to take the lead... and provides unlimited possibilities for learning.”

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

“Play is a means to learning that capitalizes on children's natural curiosity and exuberance. Play is how children make sense of the world and how children learn. Ideas and skills become meaningful; tools for learning are practiced; and concepts understood.”

Early Learning for Every Child Today: A Framework for Ontario Early Childhood Settings

6. The educator, or the extended family as educator, is central to supporting learning and development through responsive and caring relationships

Knowledgeable, responsive and reflective educators are essential. Educators recognize that creating environments and experiences to reflect the abilities, needs and characteristics of each child, family and community are central to supporting learning and development. They engage with children as co-learners, provoke children's thinking, facilitate interactions among children, and create meaningful programs.

Educators use a warm and positive approach to help children express emotions and empathy. They take time to wait, watch and listen. They know when to stand back and observe and when to enter children's play to stimulate learning.

Educators have many roles—researchers, observers, documenters and interpreters of children's learning and development, guides and negotiators, partners and mediators, creators of stimulating environments, co-constructors of knowledge, and supporters of diversity, social relationships and children's participation. Through reflective practice, educators make a commitment to build self-awareness, to regularly engage in new learning experiences, both individually and with colleagues and to continuously support high quality experiences for children.

Educators recognize that children may differ in their physical, emotional, social and intellectual capacities. By working in close symbiosis with families, educators can learn more about the circumstances of individual children, and families can learn more about promoting early learning and development.

First Nations, Métis and Inuit extended families are recognized as important early learning and development 'educators.' The *Early Learning and Development Framework* emphasizes the need to develop resources designed to assist with creating policies, programs and

research that address the specific additional cultural, linguistic and oral traditions of FNMI children and families.

To promote improved and better-connected education in preschool programs and elementary schools, it is critical that all educators have a strong understanding and the capacity to support learning and development along a continuum. This should be integrated in all post-secondary early childhood and teacher training programs.

- How can education policies support the adoption of effective early years pedagogical approaches—such as play and inquiry-based learning, educator as co-learner, indoor and outdoor environments as another 'teacher,' reflective practices and inquiry—throughout primary school classrooms?

“Most adults who work with young children spent many of their early years in settings where adults took charge of directing most happenings in the classroom... When educators view children as active participants, capable of collaborating in decision making in the learning context, children's voices become part of the discussion about the direction of learning... Together adults and children build a supportive learning space. Together they build on children's interests and educators' knowledge and resources. Through this type of collaboration, both adults and children experience satisfaction as they find a place for their ideas and strengths.”

Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide – Saskatchewan





Future considerations

This framework offers a starting point from which provinces and territories may design or review their own policies and curricula related to early learning and development. The 13 territories and provinces each have uniquely crafted early learning and development governance structures. In all cases, the CMEC Early Childhood Learning and Development Working Group has encountered strong and positive relationships among the early learning and development as well as the family support professionals working across the various social service, education and health fields.

The principles of this framework are stated broadly in consideration of the unique circumstances and characteristics of each jurisdiction. As a living document, the framework will evolve as new research and new understandings about children's learning and development emerge.

CMEC Statement on Play-Based Learning

At the recent World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, organizers, keynote speakers, scientists, experts, and political figures underscored the enormous benefits of early learning.¹ CMEC agrees with this position and believes that purposeful play-based early learning sets the stage for future learning, health, and well-being.

Learning through play is supported by science.

The benefits of play are recognized by the scientific community. There is now evidence that neural pathways in children's brains are influenced and advanced in their development through exploration, thinking skills, problem solving, and language expression that occur during play.

Research also demonstrates that play-based learning leads to greater social, emotional, and academic success. Based on such evidence, ministers of education endorse a sustainable pedagogy for the future that does not separate play from learning but brings them together to promote creativity in future generations. In fact, play is considered to be so essential to healthy development that the United Nations has recognized it as a specific right for all children.²

Learning through play is supported by experts.

Learning through play is supported by early years experts. Lev Vygotsky identified play as the leading source of development in terms of emotional, social, physical, language, or cognitive development. Psychologist David Elkind that "play is not only our creative drive; it's a fundamental mode of learning."³ Such experts recognize that play and academic work are not distinct categories for young children: creating, doing, and

learning are inextricably linked. When children are engaged in purposeful play, they are discovering, creating, improvising, and expanding their learning. Viewing children as active participants in their own development and learning allows educators to move beyond preconceived expectations about what children should be learning, and focus on what they are learning.

Learning through play is supported by children and parents.

Learning through play is supported by children. It is their natural response to the environment around them. When children are manipulating objects, acting out roles, or experimenting with different materials, they are engaged in learning through play. Play allows them to actively construct, challenge, and expand their own understandings through making connections to prior experiences, thereby opening the door to new learning. Intentional play-based learning enables children to investigate, ask questions, solve problems, and engage in critical thinking. Play is responsive to each child's unique learning style and capitalizes on his or her innate curiosity and creativity. Play-based learning supports growth in the language and culture of children and their families.

When children are playing, children are learning.

Given the evidence, CMEC believes in the intrinsic value and importance of play and its relationship to learning. Educators should intentionally plan and create challenging, dynamic, playbased learning opportunities. Intentional teaching is the opposite of teaching by rote or continuing with traditions simply because things have always been done that way. Intentional teaching involves educators being deliberate and purposeful in creating play-based learning environments — because when children are playing, children are learning.

From the Experts:

Play lies at the core of innovation and creativity. It provides opportunities for learning in a context in which children are at their most receptive. Play and academic work are not distinct categories for young children, and learning and doing are also inextricably linked for them.

(Ontario Full Day Early Learning Kindergarten Program, 2010)

In play, children represent and transform the world around them, providing other children and adults with a window into their thoughts and perceptions, and often helping adults to see the world in new ways.

(BC Early Learning Framework, 2008)

Play expands intelligence, stimulates the imagination, encourages creative problem solving, and helps develop confidence, self-esteem, and a positive attitude toward learning.

(Dr. Fraser Mustard)



¹ CMEC – Canadian Delegation Report from the World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education, Moscow, Russian Federation, September 27–29, 2010.

² “Fact Sheet: A Summary of the Rights Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child,” Article 31. Retrieved on February 11, 2010 from http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Rights_overview.pdf

³ Wood, E. (2004). “Developing a pedagogy of play.” In J. Cullen (Ed.) Early childhood education: Society and culture. London, UK: Sage.

