

2020

Building on *How Does Learning Happen?*

**Pedagogical Approaches
to Re-opening Early Years and
Child Care Programs in Ontario**

Ensuring children's learning, development and well-being

This resource is designed to invite early years system leaders and educators¹ to revisit *How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years (HDLH)*, to support re-opening early years programs, including child care and EarlyON Child and Family Centres, as well as before- and after-school programs across the province.

HDLH is a professional learning resource guide about learning through relationships for those working with young children and families. It is intended to support pedagogy and curriculum/program development in early years programs. (*HDLH*, p. 5)

Now more than ever, *HDLH* is a key support for children, families and educators as Ontario recovers from the challenges of this unprecedented time. We know it is critical to put measures in place to support the immediate health and safety needs of children, families and educators; however, emotional well-being should be given the same level of care and attention. Children need responsive and caring relationships and environments that support exploration, play and inquiry, which have a long-term impact on children's mental health, well-being and capacity to learn.

These ideas, questions and lessons learned may provide some insight to support beginning thoughtful conversations on how early years settings can ensure healthy physical, social and emotional spaces for children and their families during the stages of re-opening and beyond. (Licensed child care providers: refer to Appendix A for considerations about the program statement.)

Evidence from diverse fields of study tells us that children grow in programs where adults are caring and responsive. Children succeed in programs that focus on active learning through exploration, play, and inquiry. Children thrive in programs where they and their families are valued as active participants and contributors. (*HDLH*, p. 4).

How can system leaders and educators promote resilience in children as they return to their early years settings?

By creating, fostering, and sustaining learning environments that are caring, safe, inclusive, and accepting, educators can promote the resilience and overall well-being of children. (*The Kindergarten Program, 2016*, p. 9)²

1. The term "educator" in this document refers to all who work with children and families in early years settings (e.g., centre- and home-based child care, EarlyON Child and Family Centres, Before and After School Programs and Kindergarten classrooms).

2. Many of the citations in this document come from *HDLH* and *The Kindergarten Program, 2016*. The shared pedagogical approaches and belief statements set out in both *HDLH* and *The Kindergarten Program* facilitate a smooth transition for children and families as they move from one early years program to another within Ontario's early years sector in both municipalities and school boards.

“Resilience doesn’t come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normal human resources in the minds, brains and bodies of children, as well as in their families, relationships and communities.”

(Ann Masten, p. 237)

Educators can play an important role in supporting optimal mental health and well-being for families and for children, for example, by:

- becoming aware of and connecting with community organizations that provide information and support;
- integrating practices that support resilience;
- ensuring that children and families with mental health disorders are included and accepted;
- taking a strength-based approach, recognizing and valuing the capacities that families have, while supporting them in accessing supports they need. *(HDLH, p. 31)*

“My friend attended a fall class and told me about all the good things she had experienced being with other moms at the EarlyOn Centre! And she recommended this (virtual) class to me. It put a bit of ‘normalcy’ in my maternity leave.”

“Everything went well and I was lucky to have been able to participate also in a baby massage class virtually. It was my activity with other moms and babies every week. I loved it!

*Parent participant, Prescott-Russell EarlyON Child and Family Centre/
Centre pour l’enfant et la famille ON y va de Prescott-Russell*

“Emergency child care has made us see that children are not only capable and competent but extremely resilient. We have had to make many operational changes to feel safe during this time. Everyone, children, parents and staff are unique in what they need to feel safe. Accommodating this and speaking openly and honestly with each other will be key to re-opening.”

ECE Manager, Education; Chippewas of Rama First Nation

“Emergency Child Care offered by the Halton Region has been our saviour for not only our mental well-being at our workplaces where we work to help others at this difficult time but has also provided an opportunity for our children to be in the company of others in the company of others. The experience that our children have been living at the centre is invaluable and we would really like to thank all the staff who are our superheroes. Not all superheroes wear capes, but they do help raise children, which is the single most difficult thing to do as it really takes a village.”

Parent/Guardian

How can system leaders demonstrate how much they value educators as competent, capable, curious and rich in experience?

Educators are knowledgeable, caring, reflective, and resourceful professionals. They bring diverse social, cultural, and linguistic perspectives. They collaborate with others to create engaging environments and experiences to foster children's learning and development... They integrate knowledge from theory, research and practice, their own experience and their understanding of individual children and families they work with. (*HDLH*, p. 7)

Involving educators in the planning process conveys that their expertise and ideas are valued and are critical for a successful re-opening. System leaders can acknowledge and address concerns and fears by recognizing the expertise of educators in planning, their knowledge of the children and families and their ability to offer programs that support children's learning, development, health and well-being. Educators who experience being valued contributors will be better able to support children and their families during the re-opening process.

System leaders can also share feedback with educators to let them know how valuable their work is.

How can system leaders and educators demonstrate that they value families as competent, capable, curious and rich in experience?

Families are composed of individuals who are competent and capable, curious and rich in experience. Families love their children and want the best for them. They are experts on their children. . . Families bring diverse social, cultural and linguistic perspectives. Families should feel that they belong, are valuable contributors to their children's learning, and deserve to be engaged in a meaningful way. (*HDLH*, p. 7)

System leaders can ensure that educators have opportunities to discuss how they can engage with families as contributors prior to and during the re-opening process. In addition to informing parents of the new health and safety protocols, educators can invite parents to share their ideas, questions, concerns and hopes for their children as they return. Offering opportunities for telephone or online discussions with families can support a smoother transition and ease parents' fears.

"I liked the icebreakers and the conversation topics at the end of each session! It allowed us to talk to other mothers who are going through the same situation as us, especially this year in the midst of the pandemic."

*Parent participant, Prescott-Russell EarlyON Child and Family Centre/
Centre pour l'enfant et la famille ON y va de Prescott-Russell*

“Even though the group was virtual, my questions and concerns were addressed, which sparked large-group discussions. The times of sharing were a big bonus during this pandemic.”

*Parent participant, Prescott-Russell EarlyON Child and Family Centre/
Centre pour l'enfant et la famille ON y va de Prescott-Russell*

How can educators engage in responsive relationships with children and support their emotional well-being and sense of belonging while also following protocols for physical distancing and toy and equipment usage?

Young children experience their world as an environment of relationships, which affect virtually all aspects of their development. Fostering good relationships with children and their families is the single most important priority for educators in early years programs. Families develop trust, confidence, and a sense of belonging in programs that value the centrality of the family to the health and well-being of children. In high-quality programs, the aim is to strive to establish and maintain reciprocal relationships among educators and families, and to view families as important contributors with unique knowledge, experiences, and strengths. Children’s sense of belonging and feelings of security are also strengthened when they have opportunities to make and explore connections between home and the early childhood program. (*HDLH*, pp. 24-25)

Positive, responsive relationships between educators and children are critical for emotional well-being for all children. With the new operational guidance protocols in place related to physical distancing and other public health measures, some educators may be concerned about spending all their time ensuring health and safety measures are being met, rather than connecting through meaningful interactions. Finding creative ways to welcome children and families at arrival time supports well-being and a sense of belonging and can have a big impact on their day.

As we work together to ensure everyone’s health and well-being is addressed, there is also an opportunity to connect and support families and children on a social-emotional level as well. Having a brief chat with each family can help educators to learn more about the unique characteristics and experiences of each child and family – children’s latest interests and discoveries, what brings them joy, their relationships with others and the environment around them. This type of check-in can help put children and families at ease and fosters a sense of belonging in the program. In addition, educators can work to integrate what they have learned about each child and family into experiences for the child.

“First and foremost, your focus will be on re-establishing relationships with the children in your program. They have been away from us for a considerable amount of time and might be apprehensive about coming back.”

YMCA Greater Toronto

“While practicing physical distancing can be impossible to maintain at all times, we have each outlined our process, collaborated together to come up with what we will promise each other for each other’s safety. Our processes and procedures change frequently. We are constantly evaluating for effectiveness. It sure has been great hearing children in the building. Seeing children’s smiling faces makes all the difference.”

ECE Manager, Education; Chippewas of Rama First Nation

How can system leaders and educators ensure that the environment, experiences and pedagogical approaches value children as competent, capable, curious and rich in potential? How can educators be co-learners with children?

When the schedule allows for long periods of uninterrupted play, with fewer transitions, children are calmer and more engaged. When the environment supports children’s growing autonomy and independence, challenging behaviours are reduced and educators can focus more fully on observing, interacting, and extending children’s learning and development in meaningful ways. (*HLDH*, p. 20)

When children initiate experiences, generate ideas, plan, problem-solve, make meaningful choices, and act spontaneously through play, they are more likely to be happy and get along well with others, to have lower levels of stress, and to be attentive and motivated to learn. When children are fully engaged, they develop dispositions and skills for lifelong learning that are important for success in school and beyond. (*HDLH*, p. 35)

“Although our spaces are minimalized and somewhat ‘bare’ the spaces are still set up with provocations for the children. We space them out for social distancing and set it up so that there is more of the same activity. The importance of observations for provocation is even more purposeful as there is not a lot in the environments, so the things in the spaces are very purposeful.”

Registered Early Childhood Educator, Thunder Bay

Inquiry continues to be a critical vehicle for learning. The COVID-19 outbreak provides opportunities to listen more intently to children and engage in meaningful discussions with them about what they are experiencing in the world around them. Documentation of these conversations with children could stimulate inquiry on a number of areas of interest such as:

- acts of kindness within our classrooms, schools and communities
- the study of germs and how they spread
- being aware of feelings and how to both cope with and celebrate them
- expressing friendship in new ways
- understanding protective materials and why they work
- nature's response to the outbreak.

Educators engage with the children in inquiries that enable the children to explore their questions and wonderings as co-learners with the educators. The educators offer provocations that build on the children's thinking or invite the children to engage in new ways of learning. (*The Kindergarten Program*, p. 22)

Resources

Ann Masten, "Ordinary Magic – Resilience processes in development", *American Psychologist* 56 (2001), 235.

Child Care Re-Opening – Operational Guidance During COVID-19 Outbreak (2020).

Children's Mental Health Ontario: Covid-19 Resources.

EarlyON Re-Opening – Operational Guidance During COVID-19 Outbreak (2020).

How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years (2014).

The Kindergarten Program (2016).

Think, Feel, Act: Lessons from Research about Young Children (2013). Research briefs and videos from the Ministry of Education website.

2020-21 Before and After School Kindergarten to Grade 6 Policies and Guidelines.

Appendix A: Considerations for re-opening child care

Program Statement

The program statement supports licensed child care programs in implementing HDLH with goals and approaches for meeting requirements set out in the regulations (O. Reg 137/15, Section 46). Some of the existing approaches that licensees have included in their program statement may not be feasible during this time due to physical distancing. Licensees are encouraged to have discussions with staff/home child care providers, children and families and non-profit boards as well as their program advisors on new ways to ensure that they can continue to fulfill the goals and approaches in their program statement, while adhering to the new health and safety measures for children and staff/home child care providers.

“Planning for opening an Emergency Child Care site was somewhat overwhelming given all the additional safety precautions that needed to be put into place. For example, we were required to screen families as they arrived in the morning, while we were wearing full PPE [personal protective equipment], asking specific health questions and taking their temperatures. This felt a little contradictory to how child care settings typically operate. Given that our ways of being with children and families are centred around relationships, this felt like a very clinical way to start off our day. Instead, we chose to view this as an opportunity to rethink how to connect with families and we were able to do so in new and creative ways. It was intentional to start each day with a focus on gratitude and mindfulness. This reminds us to give emotional well-being as much energy as the policies and procedures that keep us safe physically.”

Director, London Bridge Child Care Services

“We were very apprehensive about parents not being permitted to come into the centre; however, the staff found effective ways to use electronic communication with families (notes/photos etc.) so not seeing their child’s teacher face to face was not an issue at all; in fact we have received so much positive feedback from families that they feel very involved and informed about what is happening at the centre even though they have not set foot indoors!”

Emergency Child Care Operator in Kingston

“Once the children and staff were screened and in their ‘pods’ (classrooms), they were treated as family units and were able to interact just as we do with our own families within households.”

Emergency Child Care Operator in Huron County.

“The staff have made our kids feel so loved and cared for. My kids told me that they ‘hope COVID never ends because they never want to leave the child care.’ They love all the arts, crafts and activities that they get to do and appreciate how the staff tailor it all to weave in their interests.”

Parent and frontline health care worker at a London Emergency Child Care program.