

Creating Early Learning Environments



Supplement to Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide

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OVERVIEW OF *PLAY AND EXPLORATION: EARLY LEARNING PROGRAM GUIDE*

Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide was distributed to the early learning and child care sector in the spring of 2008. The *Guide* is a resource for early childhood educators to promote high quality, age-appropriate, play-based learning experiences for young children – primarily three-, four- and five-year olds.

The *Guide* outlines the vision, principles and foundational elements of quality early childhood programs. The foundational elements include:

- Children as Competent Learners
- The Changing Role of the Educator
- How Young Children Learn
- Observation and Reflection – Critical Skills
- High Quality Programming – What Does It Look Like?

In addition, *Play and Exploration* features experiences and photographs from early learning environments across Saskatchewan.

To obtain printed copies of *Creating Early Learning Environments* or *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* email the Ministry of Education at ceed@gov.sk.ca. To learn more about workshops and additional resources, please visit the early years portal at earlylearning.edonline.sk.ca

What is the Into Practice series?

The Play and Exploration Into Practice series includes supplementary resource booklets that expand upon the major components in *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide*. The Into Practice booklets offer additional background information and ideas for implementation in early learning and child care programs.

How does this Into Practice Booklet, *Creating Early Learning Environments*, connect to *Play and Exploration*?

Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide's vision for children and their environment is:

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.

Children sense that they and their families belong in the setting (*Play and Exploration*).

As part of the Into Practice Series, this booklet builds on the vision and expands on the principle of stimulating and dynamic environments as presented in *Play and Exploration*.



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The Ministry also wishes to thank the many individuals who contributed to the development of *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* including early childhood educators, content contributors, field reviewers and others. Special appreciation is extended to those willing to share their stories so others may benefit from their experiences.

We are the meaning makers – every one of us... the responsibility is clear: to interact with those in our care in such a way as to foster and enrich their meaning making. (Wells, 1986, p. 222)



CREATING EARLY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Welcoming spaces encourage children's natural responses of curiosity, exploration and communication. Carefully designed environments feature structures, objects and props that engage children in authentic choices, problem solving, investigating and discovering. The creation of an inviting learning environment supports children's social, emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual growth and development. Inviting surroundings enhance children's positive disposition toward learning and sense of belonging.

Creating the Environment for Learning

Creating environments for learning is more than simple room arrangement. Learning environments include both indoor and outdoor spaces and resources. Responsive environments encompass the values of cooperative play, large muscle activities, high drama, messy play, the sounds of childhood, working through conflict and the importance of family engagement (Curtis, 2001). In addition, the environment supports the routines, materials and interactions that occur within the space "offering children rich childhood experiences where children can build their passions and attention over time, and use open-ended materials" (Curtis, 2001, p. 42). When educators recognize the combined power of both indoor and outdoor play spaces, they realize that one area can be an extension of the other.

Stimulating and dynamic environments fulfill the following functions:

- facilitate and guide play, exploration and discovery as important processes in enhancing children's holistic development
- promote the holistic nature of children's learning in an environment that stimulates exploration, curiosity and interactions with others
- encourage children's independence, responsibility and participation in the learning environment, with the family and in the community

INDOOR AND OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS

Young children now spend most of their waking hours indoors. How many children of today will experience wonderful outdoor adventures such as those fondly recalled by their parents?

The indoor environment receives the most attention from educators, children and other adults. Often it is the first exposure that visitors have when they come to the learning environment. The indoor environment communicates the values and beliefs that underpin the living and learning that take place in that space.

Not only is being outdoors pleasant, its richness and novelty stimulate brain development and function.
(Rivkin, 2000)

Creating Early Learning Environments

Whenever adults are invited to share childhood memories, they often describe outdoor experiences as:

- *exciting games they played*
- *fantasies they imagined*
- *discoveries they made while exploring*
- *opportunities for independence and responsibility*

Children benefit from rich and stimulating play choices outdoors as well as indoors. Finding the balance between the indoor activities and outdoor explorations is part of a purposeful planning process. While climate and weather conditions can affect access to outdoor experiences, it is also possible to bring the natural world into the indoor space. Mixing natural with commercial or recycled resources enhances both settings with a variety of materials and appealing smells, colours, sounds and textures.



A slide, a bridge and small group seating area for outdoor experiences.



Playhouse and pathways for children's outdoor engagement.

Most of the features of indoor environments are also appropriate in the outdoor environment. Parallel components in indoor and outdoor areas include the space design and the available materials and presentation. Components can be replicated inside and outside, depending on the time of year and weather conditions.



A xylophone that is raised in height enables people with a mobility or physical disability to manipulate the instrument.

Space Design and Arrangement

The space design and arrangement considers the large items of an environment. Often these features are fixed as part of the structure of the space, and educators should keep these components in mind when creating early learning environments for children. Examples include placement of windows, doorway, sink, playground equipment and an outside access door.



Props support dramatic play.

Indoor and outdoor features of space design and material and equipment arrangement include:

- welcoming spaces for children, families and educators
- transition spaces for moving indoors and outdoors
- inclusion of children's perspectives in design
- areas for display of children's projects and creations
- adaptive design features to accommodate persons with a mobility or physical disability
- spaces for small, active groups
- places that encourage interaction and relationship building
- private, quiet spaces for talking, thinking and planning
- multilevel areas
- wet and dry areas
- pathways
- natural materials such as tree stumps and branches, plants and water enhance and define spaces
- habitats for insects, birds or other animals



An aquarium provides a habitat for fish.

Open spaces with a mix of larger and smaller areas maximize:

- *interaction*
- *cooperation*
- *collaboration*
- *participation*
- *communication*
- *concentration*
- *investigation*

Children and adults can observe the various play possibilities and move in/out of the spaces with ease. This type of modified open plan (Moore, 2002) offers easy access and flexible arrangements for learning choices over time. Children can identify and engage with those activities and resources that match their current interests and curiosity.



Pillows, small chairs and sofas offer welcoming and transition spaces for children, families and educators.

INVOLVING CHILDREN IN PLANNING THE ENVIRONMENT

A well-designed environment is based on

- *sensitive planning focused on learning and growing*
- *knowledgeable, supportive educators*
- *respect for diverse cultures and languages*
- *contributions of children and family*
- *attention to the collected wisdom of researchers and practitioners*

Inviting young children to participate in designing the indoor and outdoor environment is becoming more common (Clark, 2007). Questions such as: “Where do you like to play? What is important in your space?” elicit children’s perspectives about the areas or components that are most meaningful to them. By recording their responses, the educator engages children in thinking about their learning spaces and also encourages early literacy connections with print.

Making cameras available offers another way to involve children as they photograph their favourite indoor and outdoor areas. Preparing photo books of these areas reveals how children see their environment and what they value in their daily activities. Group discussions about the photos may lead to creating maps of their environment with educator assistance. Important areas on the maps may be represented by their photos or their drawings. These maps in turn, stimulate negotiations between educators and children that may result in plans to change the arrangements. This supports the social-emotional development of children and provides opportunities for higher levels of thinking.



TIME TO REFLECT

Draw a floor map of the fixed features of your program space.

Reflect on how your program space incorporates the features of indoor and outdoor space design and arrangement. List the changes you would make.

ACCESSIBLE MATERIALS AND PRESENTATION

The accessible materials and their presentation are used by the children to enhance their investigation and exploration. The role of the educator is to observe the interests of the children and change the materials, objects and props throughout the year to correspond to the interests of the children. Children contribute their ideas to the plan and care of the space.

Accessible materials and presentation:

- items within the general area
 - materials, including movable furnishings, structures and equipment
 - interactions and relationships
- (Curtis & Carter, 2008)

Accessible materials are those age-appropriate materials, furnishings and equipment that children can reach and use independently (Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, 2005). Children of all ages and abilities are attracted by aromas, sounds, colours, light, reflections and textures. Adding materials that invite touching, viewing and listening broadens children's experiences as they explore the environment. Shiny mirrors, sparkling beads, transparent fabrics and reflected light focus children's attention on new ways of seeing the world. Musical sound, instruments to play, and recordings of bird songs all invite children to listen attentively and respond creatively.

Aromas from natural sources, such as herbs and evergreen trees, are found indoors and outdoors. These aromas send invitations to children to distinguish between the scents and to describe their responses in various modes, including spoken and written words, colours, sounds and movements. Educators planning programs should be aware of any sensitivity to natural aromas and allergies affecting children, families and staff members.

Considerations for planning accessible materials and presentation:

- offering inviting materials, creative and adapted equipment
- including varying textures, colours, sounds and aromas
- balancing soft items and hard materials
- including living things (plants, pets, insects ...)
- providing various literacy materials and activities
- honouring reflections of the children, families and educators who live and learn in the spaces
- involving children in planning and caring of spaces



Children's projects and creations aesthetically and respectfully displayed.

- establishing areas that support interaction and relationships
- setting aside adequate time to explore and become involved in play
- creating areas for building, drawing, moulding and representing ideas
- documenting learning processes
- aesthetically displaying children's projects

CREATING INVITATIONS

One way to organize and present materials is through creating invitations. An invitation is a collection of interesting and carefully combined materials (Curtis, 2004). The materials are aesthetically organized and presented to children in appealing displays on shelves, at experiential centres and on tables.

Invitations may be used to:

- respond to/enhance an emerging interest
- help children learn new skills and multiple uses for tools and materials
- offer activities and experiences with particular content knowledge
- introduce children to new concepts or events



Natural aromas, colours and textures engage children in sensory exploration.



These materials invite children to interact with orange-hued objects.



These materials are presented to invite children to garden.

EXPERIENTIAL CENTRES

Experiential centres are areas in the environment that invite children to discover, imagine, investigate, question, think about and test their ideas (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008). *Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide* features examples of materials that encourage exploration by children.

A balance of simple and complex resources should be found in each experiential centre. A simple resource is a one-use item, such as scissors, which has a primary purpose. A complex resource is a multiple-use item, such as clay or blocks, which can be explored by children in a number of ways.

When young children select complex resource materials and participate in meaningful activities, they make multiple connections across holistic growth and development.



Blocks and an overhead projector invite children to build.



Furnishings and all displays are accessible to children of various abilities to see and explore.

NATURAL MATERIALS

Including natural materials in the learning environment gives children opportunities to interact with nature. Mixing natural with commercial or recycled resources enhances the learning experience with appealing aromas, colours, sounds and textures. Natural materials provide children with a range of sensory experiences.

Collections might include:

- plants
- water
- natural light
- feathers, birds' nests, eggs, straw or twigs for nest building
- stones of different colours, sizes and textures
- various sizes and shapes of tree branches and tree trunks
- fruits or vegetables in season
- shells



Collections of shells allow children to experience various sizes, textures, colours and shapes.

- dirt with earth worms for exploration and observation
- collection jars and insects
- sand, sticks and corks
- leaves and branches

What might you add to the lists?

What might children add to the lists?

EDUCATOR ROLES

As the early childhood educator observes and listens to the children, a common interest may surface from their conversations. The educator should note the children's ideas and activities to gain new information about additional props that might extend their learning. For example, the sand table might hold seeds paired with a variety of bowls, scoops and cups to extend children's exploration and investigation of measurement and spatial sense. As interests change, a collection of coloured marbles, beads and other small round items fill the table to extend the learning experience.



An open basket of sticks is accessible to children and allows the materials to be used in creative ways.



Books and natural and commercial props are offered to engage children in exploring the season of spring.

Table tops can be transformed with mirrors, flowers or herbs with appealing aromas to provide children with greater sensory learning opportunities. Water also provides another sensory learning experience when offered in a variety of containers such as shiny metal tubs along with stones and shells or objects that float.

When selecting and arranging materials within program spaces, educators consider the following:

- uncluttered spaces that allow children to focus on materials
- children's perspectives and interests
- purpose of areas and enhancement of holistic development
- available space, features, heights and size of environment
- creative ways to accommodate storage and displays
- aesthetic appeal
- balance of natural, commercial, simple/complex and authentic items
- flexibility of time and materials
- new possibilities to transform the environment and generate learning
- diverse and unusual ways to organize, combine and arrange materials
- plans that include ample time to learn from, maintain or change the resources



TIME TO REFLECT

Look back at your floor plan and the lists of features that create an early learning environment (pages 3-5). It is important to start with one change at a time and incorporate the ideas of the children as changes are made.

Where would you begin first to make changes? Is this also the priority of the children?

List the changes you would make. How can you involve the children in planning the changes?

THE FOUR DOMAINS OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Play and Exploration: Early Learning Program Guide (2008) states that children develop as whole persons whose growth is affected by what happens in the early learning environment. Children grow and learn holistically through their exploration, their relationships and their experiences within the learning environment. Early learning environments should be structured to reflect and support the four domains of development: social-emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual.

A high quality indoor and outdoor environment is influenced by the values and views of the planners as well as by choices about the integration of the social-emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual aspects. The result is a holistic environment, well-prepared and maintained through regular care and attention. Each part of the environment contributes to children's overall growth and communicates its special purpose to the participants.

As responsive adults in the holistic environment, educators:

- assist children with their planning and choices
- discuss ideas with children and other adults
- supply materials and equipment
- respond to children's questions
- allow sufficient time for children's deeper thinking and investigations
- further children's independence through flexible schedules
- encourage children's developing abilities to make decisions and accept responsibility

1. SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL ASPECT

In order for children to experience social-emotional growth, programs need to consider the social-emotional aspect of the environment.

Early childhood environments should convey a homey, caring atmosphere in which children, families and adults feel welcome and comfortable. Children and parents will be able to identify themselves in the setting through displays of family photos, children's projects and cultural artifacts. Parents will appreciate appealing and relaxed settings that ease their children's transition from home to the new surroundings.

People play a critical role in creating the social-emotional aspect of an environment. Sensitive educators design the space to ensure that children feel secure, are respected and see themselves as belonging in the learning environment.

Our designs shape children's beliefs about themselves and life. In a well-designed area, children feel engaged and secure.
(Olds, 2000, p. 13)



Mirrors add opportunities for children to observe themselves, building self-identity.

Environments promote children's social development through design features that invite dramatic play, collaboration in projects and relationships with peers and adults. Experiential centres with simple and/or complex resource choices (Moore, 2002) accommodate groups of children to gather, to discuss and to plan their play investigations. Independence, interactions and explorations flourish within the setting. These cooperative ventures support a sense of belonging and self worth. Children widen their understanding of who they are and what they can contribute to projects during play interactions.

Children's abilities to share, take turns or control their emotions and actions increase during their play with friends. Environments where perceptive educators appreciate children's ideas and interests support the social-emotional development of children. Soft materials, flexible furnishings and calm, quiet spaces contribute to children's social and emotional growth. All aspects of the environment invite participation and acknowledge children's competence in decision making and working together.

2. PHYSICAL ASPECT

Children naturally move throughout the available space. Children learn through daily activities that provide opportunities to use their bodies in a wide variety of large muscle experiences (Olds, 2000).

The physical aspect of the environment needs to be safe with clear limits. Children need accessibility to indoor and outdoor areas. Experiential centres support large muscle development, such as constructing, digging, dramatic play and movement such as climbing, jumping, running and dancing.

Small muscle development occurs as children have experiences that use miniature movements. Experiential centres include materials that provide small muscle development, such as objects for beading, puzzles, ribbons, musical instruments, wands, small blocks and objects for building, miniature props such as animals and cars, puppets, creative art supplies such as scissors, markers, crayons, pencils, paintbrushes of various sizes and thicknesses and housekeeping objects such as spoons for mixing, containers for scooping, teapots for pouring, telephones for dialing and shoes and capes for dress up.



When the physical aspect of the environment accommodates learning experiences for children to grow physically, children are able to make decisions about boundaries, explore spaces and test their abilities and ideas (Olds, 2000).

Physical space, both indoor and outdoor, is dedicated to all children's learning and interactions. An effective design for defining areas combines a partial opening or gap with temporary partitions formed by portable screens, movable half walls, storage shelving, solid/transparent fabrics or wooden structures to enclose several sides of the area.



Children may climb or crawl in and out of this space.



This space features a pillow for comfort. A roof as a hideaway and the puppet theatre on the right provide a partition to this special space.

Appropriate spaces that support muscle development include:

- outdoor open spaces for running, biking, sliding, throwing
- structures that invite climbing, swinging, jumping, sliding, crawling
- comfortable, large group meeting places
- music, movement and dance areas
- building or construction areas
- representation areas (painting, drawing, sculpting, writing...)
- exploration areas (special invitations feature machines, materials...)
- crawl structures may be collapsible fabric or permanent lofts, cubbies and tunnels
- dramatic play space (dress up clothes and props)
- accessible spaces for children with differing mobilities



Crawl structures may be permanent or temporary.

3. INTELLECTUAL ASPECT

Supporting the intellectual aspect of the environment arises from rich resources, flexible schedules and caring support offered in the space design. When children are trusted to make choices and decisions during their time in the setting, they are quick to demonstrate their capacity to ask questions, seek answers and work together on projects. Educators ensure that the environment complements the interests, suggestions and activities of the learners. Using their combined ideas, children and adults construct holistic environments that provoke questions, capture the imagination and stimulate curiosity to learn more (MacNaughton, 2003).



Interesting objects promote children's curiosity.

Children are eager to learn and to explore materials, spaces and structures that invite wonder and curiosity. The intellectual aspect of the environment combines natural, purchased and authentic resources that engage children in experimenting, discussing, constructing and representing their understandings.

The intellectual aspect of the environment stimulates these connections which, in turn, promote deeper learning and creative thinking. Time is flexible so that new possibilities that arise can be accommodated.

Materials become symbols

Materials in the environment are resources that support children's learning about their world. Materials invite children to explore and search out answers to their questions (Curtis & Carter, 2008). As children become familiar with new items, they learn how objects function and what can be done with them. Children begin to make connections between what they already know about the world and what they learn through manipulating materials. The new objects become the symbols of their new understandings. They stand in for, or represent, new understandings that children eagerly share with others.

The photos on the right feature a pencil drawing representation of a pirate ship. The next step was to use the drawing to support the creation of a three-dimensional pirate ship using open ended materials.



Educators give value to these learning experiences by:

- ensuring that there are multiple ways or languages available to children for representing or describing their new learning
- inviting children to choose from a range of possibilities to communicate their new ideas. For example, they may combine words or recording tools or constructions or other visual media to represent what they have learned
- documenting children's learning processes using these representations
- encouraging children to revisit and share documented experiences
- engaging other educators and parents in conversations about the documentations
- encouraging new questions for exploration generated by the documentation



Objects are offered to expand children's engagement with birds.

4. SPIRITUAL ASPECT



A discovery table featuring natural objects.

The spiritual aspect of the environment reveals the wonder and beauty of the natural world. Living plants and animals as well as complex objects, such as rainbows, clouds, shadows, puddles or sand, offer enticing possibilities for learning. Children's curiosity and desire to appreciate and understand their world stimulate ongoing investigations of naturally occurring phenomena.

Educators witness the appeal of natural surroundings whenever children encounter the various facets of nature. The natural environment offers multi-sensory experiences to learners as they probe, try out, observe what they see, smell, touch and hear. When educators observe and learn along side children, they can promote children's explorations and discoveries through suggestions, questions or by introducing new items into the setting.

It is the spirit of a place that makes it memorable, that expands our sense of what is most loving, creative, and human about ourselves.
(Olds, 2000, p. 15).

Creating Early Learning Environments

The spiritual aspect of the environment offers opportunities for:

- wonder
- curiosity
- creativity
- imagination
- appreciation
- natural materials

Because the natural environment is also strongly linked to the physical, social-emotional and intellectual aspects, learning opportunities are rich, integrated and diverse. Appreciation of the natural world is further strengthened when natural materials are incorporated into the indoor environment. Children learn to value the environment when they are exposed to living organisms. Children develop a sense of responsibility when they participate in sustaining growing plants and caring for animal pets.



Hamsters and fish add multi-sensory learning experiences to environments.



Children used objects to represent their ideas in a three-dimensional structure. The structure is displayed for others to view.



Splashing in a puddle to determine how far the water will reach.

Children investigate how shadows grow and move.

SUMMARY

Creating early learning environments for young children provides early childhood educators with ideas to enhance the space which children occupy. Educators think intentionally about how to organize the space and involve the children to provide accessible materials that engage children and enhance their play experiences.

Both the indoor and outdoor environments are important to children's growth and development.

Children naturally grow, develop and learn holistically at their own pace when programs support the development of the four aspects of social-emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual within the environment.

Connecting social-emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual aspects of the indoor/outdoor environments respects children's holistic learning processes. Children and adults alike benefit from safe, beautiful, comfortable spaces that integrate all aspects. Creating healthy and inviting environments encourages all participants to explore the many possibilities for learning and living in a caring community.

RESOURCE SHEET

A. Tools to Assess the Environment

The use of a tool to assess the environment can be very beneficial through providing another lens through which to view the learning space. Tools can also decrease the influence of any bias that may be present by adding objectivity.

The two main suggested tools are:

1. Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale – third edition (ECERS-3)
Note there is also a tool for Infant and/or Toddler environments: Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale - third edition (ITERS3)
2. Preschool Program Quality Assessment (High/Scope)

Additional resources and supports can for indoor and outdoor early learning environments can be accessed online at earlylearning.edonline.sk.ca

B. How to Begin – ABCs

Now that you have reflected on the changes to make to your space design and arrangement, choose a specific area and follow the outlined process.

1. Rethinking, Reorganizing, Renewing Materials

- Develop a short-term plan to examine objects and materials in your environment.
For example: each month review a different set of items, such as January - dolls and related baby items
- Schedule a short time period to gather and sort through these items
- Place the items into one of three categories/piles/containers:
 - Category A – *Always* a favourite: keep and display aesthetically
 - Category B – *Battered* and beyond use: discard or recycle
 - Category C – *Creative* possibilities: reflect and discuss potential

2. Discard or recycle the items in Category B

- Decide whether items will be discarded or recycled
- Note whether the item will need to be replaced, add the purchase list if needed

3. Sort through categories A & C

- Note any items that need repair or cleaning and follow through
- Decide how to subdivide items for easy access
- Place items in transparent, labeled containers
- Prepare a master list of containers and their contents
- Arrange neatly in storage area

4. Reflect on possibilities for using stored items to enhance learning

- Arrange selected items in attractive invitations
- Add other items as children's ideas and investigations expand
- Replace invitations as children's interests change
- Consider items using the ABC categories before returning items to storage

*Only the imagination
limits the possibilities.*

KEY ENVIRONMENT RESOURCES

The following resources support the creation of high quality environments:

Barbour, A., & Desjean-Perrotta, B. (2002). *Prop box play*. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House.

Bilton, H. (Ed.). (2005). *Learning outdoors*. London: David Fulton.

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Curtis, D., & Carter, M. (2003). *Designs for living and learning*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Curtis, D. (Producer), & Carter, M. (Producer). (2006). *Leave no child inside: Outdoor ECE program environments* [Power Point Presentation]. (Available from Harvest Resources, P.O. Box 22106, Seattle, WA 98122-0106)

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