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Manitoba First Nations Guide to Support Early Learning provides a foundation for early learning programs and initiatives within Manitoba First Nations. We hope this guide will support parents, community members, educators and all who work with young children. The information within this guide is intended as a reference for communities to promote and support early learning programs that incorporate best practices for children.

The term early learning encompasses all activities, experiences, and interactions that young children become involved in to expand their physical, emotional, social, cognitive, and spiritual areas of development. Children’s learning capacity is enhanced when their experiences are nurtured in a caring, safe environment and when they are able to explore the world through play, whether it is in the home, community, or other learning environment.

The early years (0-7) are a crucial time for learning and human development. Helping with, understanding, and supporting early learning and development will have a positive impact on the overall well-being of First Nations children. Putting support systems in place early in children’s lives will help them grow and develop into strong capable human beings who can adapt and live in a society that is forever changing.
GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Every child born into this world has their own unique identity which is built and strengthened from birth through the various stages of childhood. Identity and uniqueness is shaped by family, community, history, culture, tradition, and experiences. This guide recognizes the family and community as children’s first and most important teachers. It explores traditional teachings and practices built around the natural laws of First Nations way of life. The knowledge of these teachings has always been part of First Nations lifelong learning philosophies, and it is therefore important to continue to seek the wisdom and knowledge of the Elders.

To honour the teachings of Elders the following teachings incorporate the traditional ways of the Dene, Dakota, Ojibway, Cree, and the Ojibwe-Cree Nations. These teachings helped in the development process for this guide and support its vision. The following principles were identified in the Strategic Framework for Manitoba First Nations: Manitoba First Nations Schools and Community Programs Working Together (Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre, 17-18):

LOVE

“Love is the strongest gift that the Creator has given us. Love can overcome many obstacles and can help us accomplish what seems hard and impossible. Give love freely. Accept love freely.” (Dene)

RESPECT

“Respect means listening until everyone has been heard and understood, only then is there a possibility of balance and harmony—the goal of Dakota Spirituality.” (Dave Chief – Dakota)
**TRUTH/HONESTY**

“Be honest with yourself. Be honest with others, it will keep your life simple and bring happiness.” (Cree)

**WISDOM**

“Every day you learn something different, every day a new piece of knowledge. That’s the way you live your life. Then you approach these things a little more to hear them, to see them. And the Spirit shares knowledge.” (Ojibway)

**BRAVERY/COURAGE**

“Do not be afraid to do what is required to be done, even if it’s fearful, hard, or unpleasant. It will bring you strength.” (Cree)

**HUMILITY**

“From childhood to now, I have always worked, played, prayed, and laughed and cried on His land.” (Ruth Wood – Ojibwe-Cree)
Traditionally, First Nations children learned through their natural participation in the life of their families and communities. All aspects of daily living within their families and communities were their classroom. Elders and family members were the teachers, and children and youth saw their roles modelled by older generations. All adults helped to teach children the knowledge, skills, and attitudes they needed to function in life within an appropriate spiritual, linguistic, and cultural context.

The Wabano Parenting Society identified and described traditional roles and responsibilities of children, Elders, women and men. The following roles are described in this organization’s Parenting Bundle:

Every person has an important role to play in our communities. Our Elders tell us that within each stage of our life cycle, we have a specific gift, and a specific responsibility to our communities and our nations. Without our participation, our Elders warn, our communities will be imbalanced and incomplete. That is why it is important for all of us to know what our roles are, and to reconnect with our communities and cultures so that we can fulfill our responsibilities.

THE ROLE OF CHILDREN

As gifts from the Creator, children bring love, respect, joy and laughter
to our families; they make our families stronger and our communities whole. Our Elders have told us that each child carries a special gift entrusted to them by the Creator. These gifts will be carried by each child, to be used when they grow into the caregivers, leaders, and visionaries of our communities.

Our children are given a special place in the circle at the center of our communities. They represent our futures, and therefore need the protection of the community. Our Elders tell us that we are all responsible to this inner circle and that the needs of our children must be considered in every decision that is made by the individual, family, and community.

**THE ROLE OF ELDERS**

As our children represent our future, it is our Elders who represent our past. Wisdom, love, and spiritual knowledge are the gifts the Elders bring to our communities. We are told there is a strong bond between our Elders and our children, and this is reflected in the diagram on page 4, where the inner circle of children is always surrounded by the circle of Elders. Elders are traditionally regarded as teachers who are rich in knowledge of the past, present and the future. Each First Nation identifies their Elders according to the specific knowledge and role they carry.
THE ROLE OF WOMEN

Women occupy the next circle surrounding the Elders. Our Elders teach us that women are responsible for taking care of our Elders and children, making sure they are healthy and safe. Women in our communities are often the decision makers.

THE ROLE OF MEN

The outer circle is occupied by men, as they are seen as the protectors of all the community members. Although men are seen as the warriors, our Elders remind us that men have a responsibility to work closely and in co-operation with the women. This balanced approach ensures a healthy, functional community.

By taking back our responsibilities and accountability to the individual, the family and community, as a society and as a nation, we can begin the process of regaining our family systems, and our community and nation through loving, supportive, affirming and culturally sensitive practices, so that future generations live in reconnected circles of care. (Wabano Parenting Society 2012, 14-15)

THE ROLE OF LEADERS

Leadership plays a role in supporting early learning in communities. Leadership can advocate, communicate, inform, and collaborate in establishing and maintaining quality early learning opportunities. Leadership can include Chief and Council, school administration, child and family agencies, health programs, parents, Elders, tribal councils, and early learning programs. The children are at the centre of the circle of care. Leadership is essential in returning the focus back to the children as the priority within the circle.
INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING

Intergenerational learning describes the way that people of all ages can learn together and from each other. Having the opportunity to learn with all ages allows children to explore, create, discover, and absorb teachings, lessons, and activities. Every age group has knowledge to offer and a different way of looking at the world. Learning from a wide range of people will strengthen the whole child and encourage development in all areas. Children are natural teachers and as much as they benefit from interacting with older people, so too do the adults learn from the children.

Tagalik states, “Indigenous ways of being are grounded in strong networks of relationships and engagement across the community. These relationships provide the foundations for wellbeing. They are built in cultural knowledge and practices; building on the influential role of Elders, extended families, and relationship structures including connections to nature and spirituality” (Tagalik 2010, 32). Parents/caregivers are their children’s first and most important teachers and role models—children learn from everything they observe and experience in their family environments. In this context, everything that children learn is passed from one generation to the next through experiences. Children learn from everyone around them, so knowledge such as language, values, and a sense of purpose and belonging is passed to them by the generations that came before.
ROLE OF
THE PARENT

Research shows that children need to form secure attachments to their primary caregivers in order to grow up healthy and reach their full potential. These attachments help build the confidence children need to make meaningful connections to others in the community and beyond. It is the parents/caregivers’ responsibility to teach, nurture, care for, and love their children. Parents provide for children’s well-being and help them establish a positive outlook on life.

Parents are in the best position to encourage children’s learning. This involves supporting educators through daily communication, consultation, and collaboration. The daily observations of children’s interactions and behaviours allow parents and educators to learn more about the child and plan accordingly to meet their needs. It is important for parents and educators to be partners in the education of young children.

The development of language is especially important during the first six months to three years of life. Language acquisition begins in the mother’s womb with the growing infant learning to recognize voices. The language of children grows and develops in meaningful contexts when children explore things and have a need to communicate. It is important for parents and educators to understand both verbal and non-verbal cues of communicating to facilitate children’s language and communication development (Berk 2012). The best thing that we can do to help children develop language is to talk them, sing to them, and read to them every day.
The image of the child is rooted in culture, knowledge, personal histories, and aspirations for the future. The image of the child reflects not only a person’s belief about a child and childhood, but also beliefs about what is possible and desirable for human life at the individual, social, and global levels. By making our image of the child visible and by talking about it with others, we can further our aims to create respectful programs and environments, which build on the capabilities and complex identities of the children in our care.

Children are natural learners and their connections to family, community, culture, and place all have an effect on what and how they learn. Connection and relationships with parents and family are crucial for children from birth to seven years of age because parents and family are the first and most influential teachers in their life. As children develop and participate in everyday activities through play, communication, and relationship building, they begin to develop their own understanding, interests, and identities, whether they are positive or negative. It is at these early stages of growth and development that children need safe, secure care and nurturing so that they can develop a positive outlook for lifelong learning. Children need to be exposed to their surroundings and taught at a very early age how they are connected to all things in life.

Child development is an agreed upon sequence of developmental milestones that most children progress through in a fairly consistent pattern. Children may vary between developmental expectations at a particular moment in time but the general pattern is the same within the human developmental continuum. The milestones represent a range of developmental skills that
children need to develop across all the developmental domains in an interconnected or holistic way. These include physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and spiritual skills. Children learn and develop at varying rates and times. It is important to keep in mind that all of the experiences children have contribute to their development and that children in Manitoba First Nations will have a range of cultural and linguistic values and beliefs specific to their families and their nation.

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

This domain refers to changes in body size, appearance, proportions, and the general functioning of body systems, motor capacities, and physical health. Children are acquiring body awareness, control, and use of their senses (hearing, vision, taste, touch and smell).

COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

This domain refers to changes in intellectual abilities, including memory, academic capability, everyday knowledge, attention, problem solving, creativity, imagination, and language.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

This domain refers to attachment, children’s interactions with others, children’s involvement in social groups,
and social confidence. Through early interaction, children gain the ability to empathize with others, accept others’ viewpoints, to ask for help for themselves and others, and to describe what they are feeling.

**EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

In this domain children develop their personal traits, self-concept, identity, and emotional expression.

**SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT**

Spiritual development has to do with the search for meaning and purpose in life and for values by which to live. There are many components to spirituality including beliefs; a sense of awe, wonder and mystery; experiencing feelings of transcendence; a search for meaning or purpose; self-knowledge; relationships; creativity; and feelings and emotions.
Children develop at different rates as they grow; they acquire new skills and build on previously learned ones in order to master specific competencies in all the developmental domains.

Developmentally appropriate practice means that educators respond to children’s needs by making plans according to each child’s needs. Understanding children’s strengths and areas not yet developed will assist in planning appropriate experiences for all children to reach their full potential.

Knowledge of child development is essential in developmentally appropriate practices. It is also important that educators know where individual children are at developmentally to make decisions about appropriate learning experiences that build on children’s existing knowledge and abilities.

In order for development to flourish, caregivers must provide a safe and secure environment that allows children the freedom to test themselves, take risks, and try to reach new goals.

And as Shipley states, “Promoting developmental progress should not be confused with attempting to accelerate children’s development. Effective developmental programs promote children’s progress at their own rate and according to their own learning styles and interests” (Shipley 2008, 63).
When children play they are provided with opportunities to learn and develop in all of the developmental domains. Play is the natural way that children learn about themselves and the world around them.

Shipley writes that “play is activity engaged in freely by the child in order to explore and interact with the environment and the people in the child’s world” (Shipley 2008, 18). And according to *Early Returns: Manitoba’s Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools*, curriculum for young children should be based on play (Manitoba Child Care Program 2011). *Child-centred* play means that “children choose their activities from a strategic array of equipment, materials, and supplies in the learning centres that are planned to help children uncover knowledge and concepts and practice skills” (Shipley 2008, 149).

**THOUGHTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAY:**

- Children learn about themselves and their environments through play.
- Play is characterized by imagination, exploration, delight, unpredictability, and a sense of wonder.
- Children learn to socialize and problem solve by playing with others or on their own.
- Children are competent learners and develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities through play.
- Through play children express their thoughts and feelings; expand their social and cultural understandings; practice flexible and divergent thinking; understand others perspectives; develop self-control; negotiate roles and plans; expand language and literacy;
and enhance brain and motor development.

- Play provides a learning mode that is fun and non-threatening, allowing children to learn and grow.
- Play provides limitless opportunities for children to learn in developmentally appropriate ways.

EFFECTIVE PLAY EXPERIENCES

Some tips to help create useful play experiences:

- Children respond to guidance from caregivers who provide direction that encourages taking risks, using materials and resources effectively, and builds on children’s interests and developmental skills.
- Play experiences are activities/lessons created by the caregivers and offered to the children throughout the day in various forms including teacher-directed, discovery-oriented, and spontaneous.
- Children learn through a combination of structured and unstructured activities that happen within the home, the community, and the environment where they live.
- Curriculum is provided in a way that fosters children’s play and development.
A child’s learning environment is critical for daily learning. The learning environment refers to the physical space in which children are at play along with all the materials, equipment, and supplies that are provided within that space. It is a place that promotes early learning experiences and where adults are responsible for ensuring a safe and exciting place for children to learn to be themselves.

The learning environment should be based on children’s interests and their development levels. The learning environment needs to be designed with materials and equipment that encourage play and learning in all developmental areas.

First Nation children must be given opportunity to learn about and understand their connection to all living things, the land, the animals, the trees, and the people. Adults need to understand the teachings given by the Elders and connect the past to the present for the children so that it makes sense for them.

**OUTDOOR PLAY**

In recent years there has been a major shift into nature play and letting children be outdoors. This movement towards outdoor learning and exploration coincides with a First Nations perspective involving respect and care for all things natural within the world.

When participating in activities outdoors children learn to respect the creations and take care of Mother Earth and the animals, birds, insects, and fish that live within. “For many people, the relationship with nature that they develop in early childhood provides a spiritual sustenance that shapes and nourishes their entire lives” (Hearron and Hildebrand 2013). This coincides with land-based education,
in which children learn from the land with direct learning opportunities such as fishing, hunting, trapping, harvesting, food preparation, and survival skills.

More benefits of outdoor play:

• Outdoor play is beneficial for children as the children have greater freedom, challenges, fresh air, and an environment that encourages the children to play well with each other (Shipley 2008, 375).

• A play space that is appealing, open, natural, and offers materials for children will encourage play for long periods of time in all seasons.

• All developmental areas and types of play can be transferred outdoors as children often take the lead on their play including discovery, playing with friends, gross motor skills, imagination, and creativity.
ROLE OF THE EDUCATOR

Educators have a very important role in assisting all children to reach their full potential.

Young children require educators who are warm, caring and responsive to their needs.

Educators should make it a priority to know every child and family individually in order to build a mutual relationship with them. They can use a variety of strategies to foster adult-child interactions and peer relationships within their classrooms.

According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), developmentally appropriate practices are at the core of being an excellent teacher. Excellent teachers must be intentional in all aspects of their role and make decisions about the well-being and education of children based on what is age appropriate, individually appropriate, and appropriate to children’s social and cultural contexts.

NAEYC defines the following guidelines for teachers:

1. Create a Caring Community of Learners:
   - Get to know each child’s personality, abilities, and ways of learning
   - Provide support to all children so they can develop relationships with others and feel part of the group
1. Create a Welcoming Space:

- Plan ways for children to work and play together collaboratively
- Bring each child’s home culture and language into the shared culture of the classroom

2. Teach to Enhance Development and Learning:

- Make it a priority to know each child and where they are at developmentally
- Draw on many teaching strategies to foster learning for the group and individual children
- Scaffold children’s learning
- Use a variety of learning formats such as individual, small and large groups
- Set up the learning environment with a consistent routine and make it conducive for play

3. Plan Appropriate Curriculum:

- Work to build a strong sense of group identity and inclusiveness
- Create an environment that is organized, orderly, and comfortable to children
- Provide learning opportunities for all areas of development: phys-
ical, social, emotional, cognitive and spiritual

- Provide a wide range of experiences for children in an integrated way
- Set realistic goals for the group and for each individual child
- Provide experiences based upon children’s interests and type of play
- Provide for both teacher-initiated and child-initiated activities

4. Assess Children’s Development and Learning:

- Monitor children’s development and learning
- Guide children’s planning and decision making
- Identify children who may require additional supports
- Report and communicate children’s progress with others

Assessment methods must be age-appropriate, individually-appropriate, and culturally appropriate. More than one method should be used and assessment should rely heavily on the teacher’s observations of the child in a variety of learning situations and in all areas of development.

5. Develop Reciprocal Relationships with Families:

- Share decision making with families, parents, and educators in a spirit of partnership
- Make family members feel welcome in the classroom and encourage their participation
- Work to create relationships that are based on open dialogue
- Maintain positive two-way communication through various methods
- Acknowledge parents choices and goals for their children with sensitivity and respect for their preferences and concerns (2009)
As stated in *Early Returns: Manitoba’s Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools*, inclusion is

- Ensuring all children have equal access to and are actively involved in the program.
- Responding to the individual needs and abilities of each child.
- When the program allows for making adjustments to accommodate the needs of all children.
- Ensuring all abilities, genders, races, and religions are included within the program.
- Working with parents and professionals to gain knowledge and share expertise to make programs developmentally appropriate for children.

This *Early Returns* resource lists the benefits of inclusion:

### For children:

- Better understanding and appreciation of individual differences.
- Acceptance and respect for and from others.
- Learning with and from one another.
- More opportunities for socialization with peers.
- Preparation for full participation in the community, including the transition to school.

### For educators:

- Better understanding and appreciation of individual differences.
- Learning with and from all of the children and adults.
- Strengthening skills by working with a variety of abilities (Manitoba Child Care Program 2011, 4).
GUIDANCE

*Guiding Young Children* states that “guidance is defined as everything adults deliberately do and say, either directly or indirectly, to influence children’s behaviour, with the goal of helping the children become well-adjusted, self-directed, productive adults” (Hearron and Hildebrand, 2013, 4). Children want to behave correctly and by setting expectations of behaviour and following through, children can be successful.

**INDIRECT GUIDANCE**

In *Guiding Children’s Social Development and Learning* the authors say that indirect guiding is everything
set up in the environment that gives clues to the children on what to do without adults telling them. The environment and material are set up to help promote children’s development and children then have the flexibility and freedom to experience things on their own. The environment helps guide children’s behaviour and desired expectations without the adults telling them. Having materials accessible for children at their level allows them to feel confident and self-motivated to explore, discover and acquire self-help skills (Kostelnik et al. 2012).

**DIRECT GUIDANCE**

Direct guidance is interaction between the educator and the child. This can involve providing lessons for children along with actively talking with them in regards to behaviour expectations (rules). Educators should review behaviour expectations with the children for the space along with providing reminders throughout the day. The verbal environment should always be positive. A positive verbal environment provides ways for adults to communicate respect, empathy, warmth, and acceptance to children. These healthy environments promote high levels of self-esteem, self-concept and self-awareness. Children feel good and will experience success.
It is important that educators and others who work with children establish good relationships with families through communication. “Effective communication between families and the program is central to the success of building family-centered care; it is the cornerstone of the partnership” (Keyser 2006, 27). Ensuring that the program is communicating with its families on a daily basis will help with the partnership between the program and caregivers, making sure those voices are being heard and providing meaningful feedback about a child’s day. Communicating involves listening, speaking, writing, non-verbal communication and using accessible language. Daily communication can happen in many ways, through speaking or in writing, and can help bridge the transition between school and home.

Communication is the basis for building those strong relationships with

Children’s curiosity inspires them to interact with other people, and with things and places in their environments, virtually from birth. It is in the dance between children and other children and adults that language and culture are created and recreated from generation to generation in this dance, children are sometimes the leaders, and adults the followers, and vice versa. Adult’s responses to children’s activities – whether they respond, the appropriateness of their responses, and the creativity of their responses – affect young children’s early learning capacities and their growing sense of themselves as members of their communities. These interactions also give adults the opportunity to learn, grow, and change, and to cultivate a disposition that welcomes children’s contributions. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 10)
families and making them feel a part of the program, while ensuring their child feels at ease. A goal of any program should be engaging parents, actively encouraging their participation and decision-making within the program. In her 2010 blog on the website Edutopia, Anne OBrien states that “when we’re engaging parents, the parent is considered a leader or a potential leader who is integral to identifying a vision and goals. He/she encourages others to contribute their own vision to that big picture and helps perform the tasks that need to be achieved in order to reach those goals.” When a program engages parents, it opens up the conversation to include everyone’s decision making as opposed to telling what needs to be done. This engagement helps develop a genuine partnership.
Research suggests that relationships in children’s lives are critical for well-being. In order for children to establish a secure foundation to explore the world around them they first need to form a strong attachment to their primary caregivers (family). Strong attachments or bonding gives children the confidence to go out and explore the world and make meaningful connections with other children and adults around them. Parents must nurture and provide for children’s well-being and help them establish a positive outlook on life. Parents, grandparents, and other family members are in the best positions to encourage children to go beyond their limits in learning.

In *Creating Pathways for the Dreams of Our Children*, the authors write that family is recognized as the child’s first, lifelong and most important educator, it also recognizes that the “shared responsibilities” that exist between families, community, and professionals within the community must be part of any planning for early learning, growth and development (Gerlach et al. 2008). Grandparents, parents, and extended family members often pass on their knowledge to the next generation through family gatherings, storytelling, or daily activities such as berry picking, fishing, and hunting.

To understand children and early learning it is important to see how children become our teachers. As adults we learn from children and it is this piece that will guide and help First Nation communities come together to work for the success of the younger generation of children in the community.
Community, for the purpose of this guide, includes all parents, community members, organizations, leadership, and government agencies involved with planning and making decisions around early learning and care of young children.

Community is representative of the place where people live, work, grow, and plan together for the betterment of their people beginning with the very young.

It is important to recognize that parents and children depend on community resources to help them develop and understand the role parents play in early learning and development.

Community members can be involved in the direct delivery of early learning programs. Early learning programs should be open for people to share their gifts with children and one another (infants, youth, adults and Elders).

*Creating Pathways for the Dreams of Our Children* shares that partnerships can be built by

- Recognizing and respecting one another’s knowledge and expertise
- Sharing information
- Sharing power and decision making
- Acknowledging and respecting diversity
- Creating networks of support
• Promoting intergenerational learning between children, youth and Elders. (Gerlach et al. 2008)

There is more to an early learning program than just what is within the walls. In order for children to have an understanding of who they are and where they come from, there needs to be some introduction to the community around them. Not only will this provide learning opportunities for the children, it will also strengthen the relationship between the people and places around them.

The community is a place of connectedness, and is ideally where one feels supported, nurtured, and a sense of belonging. A healthy community focuses on the social, culture, and physical places in which children live, learn, and play. Role modelling as stated by the Elders is one key factor in reaching and teaching the early learners. (Gerlach et al., 2008, 12).

Raising children is not only a parental responsibility but is the responsibility of the entire community. During the MFNERC Elders Roundtable Gathering held in May 2013, one of the Anishinabe Elders stated, “We want minopimatisowin (the good life) for our children, along with discipline, love, and respect. It takes a whole community to educate a child. We want to control our education and we are the ones who can implement it.”

Through relationship development children begin to learn roles and responsibilities as members of the community. When developing a positive outlook, First Nations children must find balance between their physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of self.
CONCLUSION

This guide is based on developmentally appropriate practices that promote child-centred play-based learning, from a holistic approach. It was designed to encourage parents, educators and community to become partners and supporters in a child’s journey of lifelong learning so they can develop to their full potential. The guide recognizes the importance of parents, family, and community involvement in a child’s development and learning. MFNERC acknowledges the uniqueness of each First Nation and intends that this guide will be used to fit community needs. The information in the guide promotes and supports early learning programs and initiatives within First Nations of Manitoba to provide best practices for the optimal development of our children.
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<td>Sandy Bay Ojibway First Nation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Information on the document may be acquired at the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre at 204-594-1290 or via the website at www.mfnerc.org.