

Early Returns: Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework For Infant Programs







Quality early childhood programs have common principles, approaches and tools that guide practice. There is recognition that children's earliest experiences matter deeply, laying the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health.

(McCain, Mustard and McCuaig, 2011)

Introduction

Manitoba is committed to supporting quality in early learning and child care (ELCC) programs. A key component is this curriculum framework for infant programs, as it supports staff to develop, describe and enhance their curriculum so all infants learn and develop to their fullest potential.

It is essential that ELCC programs demonstrate quality and foster the social, emotional, physical and cognitive development of all children. Developmentally appropriate ELCC practice is child-centred, reflects family and community contexts, and encourages meaningful partnerships between each child, his or her family and ELCC staff.

This curriculum framework helps staff recognize that infant curriculum is based on interactions and relationships during caregiving routines, and during exploration and play. It is a companion document to *Early Returns: Manitoba's ELCC Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools*. Together, these two documents recognize the importance of observation and knowledge of children's developmental capabilities. They will assist you in determining which framework – preschool or infant – is more suitable for the children in your care.

Throughout this document, an infant refers to a child from 12 weeks to two years old. The words “child” and “infant” are used interchangeably.

Early Returns is based on current research and best practices. This framework is designed to help you develop your curriculum and write a statement that describes it. This information can enhance the quality of your program as you:

- think about what you do in practice
- explain the reasons for this practice
- evaluate and enhance your curriculum

This document is broken into four sections, as follows:

- What is curriculum for infants?
- The foundation of ELCC curriculum.
- Components of an infant curriculum.
- Developing an ELCC Curriculum Statement.



The caregiver is the most important 'ingredient' in any curriculum.

(Kovach and Da Ros-Voseles, 2008)

What is curriculum for infants?

In *Early Returns: Manitoba's ELCC Curriculum Framework for Preschool Centres and Nursery Schools*, "curriculum refers to how you organize opportunities for children to learn throughout the day." This is also true for infants. How staff plan for and respond to infants is based on goals for children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. Staff must understand and respond to the abilities, interests and needs of each child. The infant is the centre of curriculum.

In Manitoba, ELCC curriculum is not a list of topics that need to be taught or activities that have to be completed. For preschool centres and nursery schools, curriculum is the way you design interactions, relationships, environment and experiences to create learning opportunities. For infant programs, curriculum is the way you design **caregiving routines**, and **exploration and play** to create learning opportunities. Curriculum for infants is based on responsive interactions and positive relationships between each child, family and staff, and it supports diversity and inclusion.

- **Caregiving routines** are meals and snacks, naps, diapering, and greeting and departing.
- **Exploration and play** is the way infants investigate their environment with support from staff.
- Both caregiving routines, and exploration and play provide opportunities for positive interactions that support children's learning and development.

Infants are active participants in the curriculum you design, not passive onlookers. Each child is your partner in learning opportunities that occur throughout the day. You create a trusting relationship by reading each child's cues and responding to each child's individual needs. Infants must be offered flexible caregiving routines and interesting exploration and play options that incorporate learning. Learning and care are inseparable.

Infants learn about others when playing side-by-side. They learn language when you label what they are doing. They learn to self-regulate when their individual needs are met. They learn about trust and assurance when you respond to their cues appropriately.

The practices you use to implement your curriculum are based on your knowledge and beliefs about how infants learn and develop. Appropriate practices reflect your understanding of current research and theory in early childhood development, as well as your knowledge of individual children, their families and their communities.

To provide appropriate infant curriculum, you must interact, observe and take notes to understand individual infants and their development. Reflect on patterns or changes that you have recorded in sleeping, eating or other caregiving routines, or during exploration and play. Be sure to discuss these patterns or changes with other staff members and the infant's family. This way you will be better able to meet every infant's needs and provide individual learning experiences tailored to each child's developmental abilities and interests. Your curriculum will develop and evolve along with the child.

Curriculum as described by experts

The baby is the curriculum. What does “the baby is the curriculum” mean? It means the baby comes first and you should develop a special relationship and bond with that baby. You have to know the baby and the baby has to know you, well enough for you to care for him or her. This type of relationship is built on an understanding of the baby and his or her needs and wants at a particular time and as they change over time. This takes an investment of time to relate to the baby and build a relationship together that is grounded in trust.

(Kovach and Da Ros-Voseles, 2008)

The infant and toddler curriculum is not framed within traditional content fields, but rather, is based on the developmental needs and strengths of very young children. Therefore, we define curriculum as the provision of the optimum learning environment... we stress there should be no formal teaching of standards.

(Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2009)

Appropriate curriculum for infants should not be a special teaching plan added to their daily activities, but rather it should be incorporated in the infants' every experience.

(Gerber, 1997)

Certainly there are interesting activities we can offer babies, contributing to their brain development and learning, but I believe that building relationships is our primary curriculum with infants and toddlers.

(Carter, 2002)

Curriculum is a major issue because we now know that infants and toddlers are competent learners and that the early years are an important foundation for learning in the later ones.

(Gonzalez-Mena and Widmeyer Eyer, 2004)

The foundation of early learning and child care curriculum

The infant and development

Research on brain development in infancy has shown the importance of the first years of life. **“Eighty per cent of our baby’s total brain growth takes place in the first two years of life.** In the first year alone, the brain more than doubles in size, reaching 70 per cent of its adult weight and growing more than it ever will again. In other words, **infancy lays the foundation for all other learning** [emphasis added]” (Heller, 1997).

In infancy, children are discovering new information about themselves and the world around them all the time. Erik Erikson’s theory of psychosocial development explains that infants are exploring their ability to trust adults to meet their needs. Learning to trust leads to developing a secure attachment to a caring adult. John Bowlby explained that children with secure attachments feel safe to approach their caregiver for comfort, understanding and protection when needed. This safety, along with positive interactions and trusting relationships, is essential for children to feel confident enough to begin to explore the world around them more actively. Jean Piaget’s theory of cognitive development describes infants in the “sensory-motor” stage, meaning that their primary modes of exploration and play include using their senses and movement to investigate the learning environment. Lev Vygotsky teaches us to scaffold learning by providing an environment that is challenging yet gives the infants opportunities to be successful as they explore and play.

Curriculum practices are informed by current research, developmental theories and knowledge of each child in your program. Therefore, you must use your knowledge of child development and think critically about how to implement curriculum so all infants can learn and develop to their fullest potential. Carefully consider how

Infants learn through their senses: touch, smell, sight, sound and taste.



you design interactions and relationships, play and exploration opportunities, and caregiving routines for each child in your care.

You must provide a balance of opportunities to support all areas of children’s development as well as the interests, abilities and needs of each infant. Emotional development is fostered when you label the child’s feelings and the feelings of others to encourage empathy. For example, you may say, “Nadia, you look sad. Aurora, look at those tears on her face. How can we make her feel better?” You support social development during meal times when you provide a small table for three to four older infants or position high chairs to face each other so infants can see and respond to each others’ voices and gestures. You support infants’ physical development when you allow them to crawl and walk outside on grass or snow rather than being pushed in a stroller. Because you understand that infants learn through their senses, you allow infants to mouth safe toys to enhance their cognitive development. Be sure that the child has fully explored the item before setting it aside to be sanitized.

Curriculum for infants must be designed for their current developmental level, not their future development. Children need to learn preceding skills such as crawling

before they can begin to walk. Children gain competence and confidence as they master new skills at their own pace. To support learning, challenge each child's development, but stay within his or her ability to succeed. For example, allow infants to roll over when they are ready, rather than being pushed or urged to do so. Encourage older infants to walk to the snack table and sit down on their own to support their independence, rather than lifting them into a high chair or group feeding table. Allow older infants to use ride-on toys when they can climb on and off without adult help. When a child bites another child, encourage gentle touches to model empathy, rather than forcing or expecting the child to apologize. When you give support through positive interactions and encourage children's development at their own pace, they learn to feel secure and confident enough to direct their own learning through exploration and play. This helps infants learn about themselves and actively investigate their surroundings.

To provide quality learning experiences, knowledge of child development is essential; however, knowledge of each individual infant and family is also required to make decisions that will best suit each child. Working closely with families provides you with guidance for planning responsive interactions with infants that support diversity and inclusion. These decisions about curriculum are based on your intention to support children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development according to each child's individual abilities, needs and interests. Because infants develop and change so rapidly, you must actively take time every day to learn about and understand each of the children in your care by observing, interacting, listening, note-taking and reflecting. To provide curriculum appropriate for the infants in your care, consider questions such as:

- What has the family shared with you about their child?
- What are some of the family's practices in child rearing?

Ways to communicate with infants

*Develop relationships by focusing on infants and their needs. Make sure that your actions, body language and facial expressions match with your words. For example, when you are concerned and ask, "Are you okay?" you should **look** concerned instead of smiling at the child.*

- **Explain what will happen.**
"I am going to pick you up now so you can wash your hands before you eat."
- **Label and describe toys.**
"You are holding a baby. Your baby is wearing a hat on his head."
- **Label and describe feelings.**
"Fatima, you have a smile on your face. You look happy that we are playing outside."
- **Share your own feelings and be honest, yet stay calm.**
"I know that you are angry, but I feel hurt when you hit me."
- **Tell them what you see them doing.**
"You are drawing lines on your paper. Those two lines cross each other."
- **Use words to describe what is going on in the environment around them.**
"Look, José is stacking the blocks. He is putting one on top of the other."





Brain research shows that emotional and cognitive self-regulation have the same neural roots. Warm, physical contact with adults helps build the neural pathways in children that manage emotional responses. When adults are responsive to children's feelings, children are better able to organize both their thinking and their behaviour as they grow and their brains develop.

(McCain, Mustard and McCuaig, 2011)

- What have you learned about this child from interactions during daily caregiving routines?
- What have you learned about this child from observation and interactions during exploration and play?
- What has this child experienced?
- What does this child already know?
- What might this child be ready for and interested in next?

Enjoy each moment with the children and remember that what may seem common or uneventful to adults is often quite fascinating for infants. "A program that is child-centred recognizes that childhood is precious and fleeting. As caregivers we need to be in the moment with children. This approach helps create memories that will sustain children for the rest of their lives" (Martin and Berke, 2007). So, instead of rushing through caregiving routines or exploration and play, slow down and let each child fully experience every aspect of the curriculum. These learning experiences are crucial for infants' healthy growth and holistic development.

Interactions and relationships

Responsive interactions are positive and meaningful to children, parents and staff, and help you build respectful relationships. To be meaningful and personalized, your interactions must be based on what you know about each individual child or parent, and your response may be different even if the situation is the same. Relationships are based on trust and comfort. As you spend time interacting with infants and their families, each one of you begins to feel comfortable, gets to know each other better and you develop a trusting, respectful relationship.

Children and staff

Relationships are supported when staff value each infant as a unique individual and treat them with care, understanding and respect. Cues are an infant's way of communicating with you. Hiccups, coughing, crying, fussing and cooing, movements, gestures and facial expressions are examples of cues. Competent and confident staff are comfortable responding to the range of cues that infants use to express themselves and view them as important to language and social development. "Tuned in caregivers can learn to read individual babies"

different signals to feeling hungry, tired, or in pain” (Gonzalez-Mena, 2010). This is one of the reasons why it is so important to pay close attention to each child and be present in the moment, to recognize and acknowledge what the child is experiencing.

It takes skill and practice to observe and interpret the developmental needs of individual infants. You respect infants by listening to their cues and encouraging them to communicate, rather than by hushing infants or making comments such as, “You are okay. Stop crying now; it’s okay.” Instead, speak directly to infants to reassure them that their feelings and experiences are valued. Ask what they might be feeling: “Hannah, you are crying. Are you sad that Daddy went to work? I will sit with you until you’re feeling better.” Your timely, respectful responses to cues and communication will help develop a sense of trust and security for each infant in your care. Sensitive, caring interactions that address children’s feelings are important for their emotional and cognitive development.

Remember that interactions and communication are two-way exchanges: wait and watch for the infant’s cues and responses, verbal or non-verbal, before continuing with your own questions or comments. Confirm the child’s message and respond to it. For example, an infant stands up in his crib. You confirm his message by saying, “I see you standing Aiden, I’ll be right there to rub your back once I put Parker in her crib.”

You help infants understand and use language as you interact with them during caregiving routines and times when children are actively playing and exploring. When you are cuddling in the book corner to read with one or two infants, interacting with an individual infant during diapering or facilitating an interaction among peers at play you help children learn to communicate and expand their vocabulary. Label items children look at or hold, then talk to them about it. For example, while a child is eating, you could say, “I see you are eating noodles for lunch today. You put the noodles on your spoon. What do those noodles taste like?” You help children learn to communicate when you model how to start and take turns during conversations. All of these positive interactions provide learning opportunities for infants and build relationships between staff and children that are essential to quality early learning and child care.

Families and staff

Although interactions and relationships between staff and children are important, positive interactions and relationships between staff and family members are just as important. Each infant’s comfort in your program depends on your interactions and relationship with his or her family. When infants see positive interactions between staff members and their family, they feel safer and more secure in the relationship. Taking time to build

When caregivers react in sensitive, responsive ways to meet each baby’s individual needs, the baby feels worthwhile and valued. Watching, asking, adapting, talking, and responding are key behaviours that make up responsive care. This means waiting for responses by babies and including that response in the next action. This reinforces responsiveness in caregiving practice.

(Kovach and Da Ros-Voseles, 2008)



positive relationships will help both infants and families feel comfortable, which will encourage them to share their interests, successes and challenges with you.

Building relationships with families should be supported throughout your program. Encourage families to visit the program before their children start, so they can observe and ask questions about your curriculum practices. Ask about the family's values and practices. This will help you understand them as a family, including their hopes and dreams for their child. This understanding deepens your relationship with parents, allowing you to develop a partnership that supports the child's and the family's needs.

Learn about each family's individual needs and be prepared to respond to them. For instance, a mother may visit the program to nurse her baby, or a father may drop off his child after morning nap when working a later shift. Encourage parents to call to check in and let them know they are welcome to drop by any time or stay and participate in the program with you and the children.

As staff, part of your role is to ask for information from parents and family members, especially during arrival and departure times. It is important to create a respectful relationship with each family, so family members feel comfortable sharing information with

you about their infant. You can tell them about the day, including their child's caregiving routines and experiences during exploration and play. This is an important step to ensure continuity between home and child care. This simple interaction can also help parents feel more confident about leaving their child in your care.

In addition to talking to parents, provide a written daily record of information about the child's well-being, learning and development. Include information like:

- how much of what foods the child ate
- how the child settled down for nap and how long he or she slept
- the number of soiled diapers
- where the child played
- what the child played with and with whom
- what the child tried to do and his or her accomplishments

Encourage parents to share information they have noticed at home about caregiving routines and play experiences with their child to further ensure continuity between home and child care. The exchange of information between families and staff strengthens not

Infant and toddler curriculum should be a dynamic, interactive experience that builds on respect for and responsiveness to young children's interests, curiosity and motives, and to their families' goals and concerns.

(Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2009)





Provide guidance and allow infants to touch each other. Sit beside them while they explore this relationship and talk about their positive interactions: “Riley is crawling over to say hello to you.”

only your relationship with the family, but also with the infant. Developing and maintaining a strong relationship with each family will help you better understand and meet the needs of each infant.

Among children

Infants need opportunities to interact with other children. Peer interactions and relationships are important for each child’s social development. Infants begin to learn important social skills and become friends with each other by being encouraged to communicate and explore ways of interacting with other children and adults. Create daily opportunities for infants to be near one another during caregiving routines and exploration and play times.

Supportive transitions with very small groups of children offer possibilities for peer interactions. When you help a small group of two or three children get dressed for outdoor play, label their actions and encourage them to notice and interact with each other. For example, say, “Look Adina, Rebecca is putting on a hat. Where is your hat?” or “Carmen, can you help Sadie find her red shoe?” A safe and healthy environment where you supervise and interact with children directly provides many opportunities for positive relationships among peers.

Consider how space, materials and time in the learning environment can encourage interactions between young infants and older infants. Ensure that children have long uninterrupted blocks of time for exploration and play. They will learn from one another while you interact with

them and support their interactions with each other. For example, if you are playing with large magnets in the science corner with one child, you can invite another to join in. Acknowledge children when they are playing together or beside each other to promote positive peer interactions. For instance, you could say, “Chloe, you are playing with the blue cup and saucer and Alex is next to you playing with the kettle. You are playing in the kitchen together.” Informal play experiences, where groups form naturally as children come and go, offer an appropriate way to encourage children to interact and be part of a small group. Allow time for infants to focus on exploration and discovery with their peers without adult interruptions. Use your observation skills and knowledge of each infant in your care to make peer interactions safe and positive experiences for each child involved.

As a responsive caregiver, you provide time for the infants in your care. Time to be cared for, time to explore, and time to play.



Ask yourself:

- How do I get to know each infant and his or her individual cues for communicating their needs?
- How do I show respect for each infant as a unique individual?
- How do I interact in caring ways with each infant?
- How do I build trust with each infant?
- Does my tone of voice match my facial expression when I am communicating with infants?
- How do I support reciprocal interactions and relationships with the infants in my care?
- How many back-and-forth conversations do I have with each infant on a daily basis?
- How much time do I allow for infants to talk, vocalize or react to my words and actions before responding?
- Do I communicate with younger infants by repeating their sounds, changing my pitch and tone?
- Do I speak to older infants in a respectful way, using descriptive and meaningful words to expand their vocabulary?
- Do I label toys and other items that children are looking at or holding to help build their vocabulary?
- Do I talk to children about their actions, feelings, intentions and experiences?
- How do I get to know each infant's family?
- How do I remember each parent's and sibling's name?
- How much time do I spend talking with each family?
- How do we initiate and support a positive relationship with each infant's family?
- How do we respect each family's goals for their infant, even when they differ from our own?
- How do we share information with families about their infant's ongoing learning and development?
- What opportunities do we provide in the program for families who want to be involved in their children's daily experiences?
- How do I encourage interactions among infants, verbally and non-verbally?
- How do I encourage infants to communicate with each other?



Regardless of their level of development, infants need a caregiver's help in each stage, as they learn about security, exploration, and identity.

(Lally et al., 1995)

All children should feel a sense of belonging by being accepted, represented and respected for their individuality.

Diversity

Diversity refers to the range of similarities and differences among children, families and staff in your program and community. It includes race, culture, abilities, gender and age. Recognizing, respecting and celebrating diversity is very important to ELCC experiences. It enhances each child's social and emotional well-being, and promotes caring, co-operative and equitable interactions with others (Derman-Sparks, Ramsey and Edwards, 2006).

Infants will build confidence as they begin to develop self-awareness and a sense of identity. To acknowledge and learn more about diversity, show respect towards the uniqueness of each child, his or her family, the staff and the community. Self-esteem, confidence and emotional development are strengthened when children and families feel accepted and supported.

Values and beliefs are different in each family and parenting practices may also differ among families in your program. You need to understand the beliefs and values behind family practices to understand, accept and support – as much as possible – each family's desires for their child.

Work together with families to increase your cultural awareness, and consistently support their caregiving routines and the ways they explore and play with their child. Rather than comparing different parenting practices, try to find the meaning behind them. For example, encourage a family to explain to you why they spoon-feed their two-year-old child and how that supports their values. To enhance families' understanding of your curriculum, explain the meaning behind the practices you follow that may be different. For example, explain why you put all infants on their backs to sleep in your program. When you communicate with families, together you can use practices that work for everyone.

It is also important for children to understand that everyone in their program and community is unique. By providing opportunities that expose children to similarities and differences in a positive atmosphere, you are supporting their acceptance of diversity. To ensure children respect one another and appreciate individuality, you must actively encourage participation of all children in settings that reflect different families' lifestyles and cultures. Consider the books, pictures and play materials that you offer to ensure they depict a variety of races, cultures, ages and abilities. Reflection of diversity in your curriculum fosters a sense of belonging and acceptance for each child in your program.

Inclusion

Inclusion is a way of thinking and acting so that every individual feels accepted, valued and safe. Inclusion means children of all abilities have equal access to participate in ELCC programs. When children are together as part of the group, each child's development is enhanced and positive social attitudes are created. Through inclusive practices, you help children with additional support needs become fully active participants in the curriculum you offer. This will mean creating or adapting certain activities or using new strategies to meet each child's needs (Irwin, Lero and Brophy, 2000). An inclusive program evolves to meet the changing needs of children, families, staff and community. Through recognition and support, an inclusive community provides meaningful involvement and equal access to the benefits of belonging.

Children with additional support needs have goals developed in an Individual Program Plan (IPP). All staff should be aware of these goals, understand them and work together to actively incorporate them into the curriculum. If supports are required to work towards children's IPP goals, they should always be provided in natural, play-based learning environments with peers.

All children should be supported so they can meaningfully participate in your curriculum.



All children have the right to have their culture acknowledged and respected. If this does not happen the child will not feel valued. By six months of age children are already beginning to notice similarities and differences in people. If they form positive attitudes towards differences they are more likely to grow up appreciating diversity as a normal part of their lives.

(Family Day Care Quality Assurance, 2005)

High-quality programs provide curriculum that is responsive to the individual abilities and needs of each child. Inclusion is more than the physical presence of a child with additional support needs in the room. Genuine social inclusion ensures that every child has the opportunity for active and meaningful participation in the curriculum. Every child has the right to positive interactions and relationships with supportive adults and peers. How this occurs will be different for each child based on his or her individual strengths, abilities and needs. When staff take the needs of each child into consideration, it fosters an environment where all children can develop a sense of belonging, and where understanding and acceptance of differences is seen as a benefit. All children should be valued, have friends and feel like they belong.

Incorporating inclusion and diversity into the curriculum

Providing opportunities for children to recognize themselves and respect others is essential in ELCC curriculum. When children are exposed to diversity and inclusion at an early age, they accept others more easily. You can help facilitate acceptance by providing children with a variety of materials and experiences that represent the families in your program and Manitoba's diverse population. Some ideas are:

- providing play food, appropriate toy people and dress-up items from different cultures
- playing diverse music for dancing
- speaking different languages to the children (for example, a child's first language)
- reading stories in different languages
- providing photos, posters and books showing people and families from diverse backgrounds and with differing abilities
- using American Sign Language to greet a family with a child who has a hearing impairment

- displaying photos of children's families
- serving foods that reflect the cultural diversity of the families in your program and community
- using adaptive equipment with appropriate training and experience, along with support from the child's family and health care providers
- inviting guests from diverse backgrounds or with additional support needs to visit your program

You must learn about the cultural values, beliefs and practices of the families in your program. Collaboration between the child's home and your program is essential for all children to feel accepted and be successful. Encourage families to share their cultural backgrounds, suggest ideas for the curriculum or donate culturally relevant materials. Ask families to share some ways you can incorporate their values into the program's curriculum practices. Respect diversity by responding to each family's beliefs and values. For example, one family may want to use cloth diapers instead of disposable diapers, so you can explore options and discuss possibilities to best support their choice. Support inclusion by making changes to your menu to accommodate children with allergies. For example, you can use soy milk to bake muffins for everyone's snack because a child is allergic to dairy products. Both of these examples are ways that you adapt to meet individual needs of the children and their families.

Incorporating diversity and inclusion in your curriculum is a benefit to children, families and staff because it helps develop a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging is essential to ensuring that programs respond appropriately to the rich diversity that is present in our families and communities. It also strengthens understanding and acceptance of similarities and differences so everyone can learn from each other.



Post photos within the children's easy reach; children feel a sense of belonging when they can see photos of themselves, their peers and their families.



Components of infant curriculum

There are two components in *Early Returns: Manitoba's ELCC Curriculum Framework for Infant Programs*:

- caregiving routines
- exploration and play

For infants, curriculum is based on developmentally appropriate and positive interaction and relationships fostered throughout the day. It is the way you design caregiving routines, and exploration and play, to create learning opportunities. The creation of a safe and encouraging learning environment is crucial for both of these components. Staff must consider how the use of space, materials, individual schedules and transitions support the caregiving routines, and the exploration and play opportunities for the infants in your care. Diversity and inclusion are incorporated in these components to create a responsive and relevant curriculum for infants.

Caregiving routines

Eating, diaper changing and napping take up much of the infant's day. These routines are important learning experiences for young children and form a vital part of the curriculum you provide.

It is important to have consistent staff providing caregiving routines for each infant. Assigning one or two staff to each infant rather than using a rotation of different staff will help

develop trusting relationships and secure attachments between infants and staff. Secure attachments are important to support infant development.

Consider how your schedule and transitions throughout the day impact the well-being, learning and development for each infant. All transitions should be based on what you know each child needs to be prepared for a change from one activity to another. To be able to respond to each infant's needs it is best to provide individualized schedules rather than one schedule that all children and staff follow as a group. Discuss home routines with families and respect their knowledge of their infant. An ongoing partnership will help you to jointly assess their child's individual needs. When a parent shares that her infant did not eat breakfast, notice and respond to his cue by offering this child a snack when he shows that he is hungry. Being responsive to each infant's individual needs means you will need to be flexible and able to adjust the general schedule of the day. Infants, especially young infants, need to sleep, eat and be changed when they are ready. They cannot wait, and they should not be expected to wait. Individual needs cannot be met if the daily schedule is set with specific eating, diapering and sleeping times for all infants to complete at the same time.

The physical caregiving environment is part of the curriculum, so you should arrange your space to provide



The whole environment, including caregiving areas, is the learning environment in an infant-toddler program.

(Gonzalez-Mena and Widmeyer Eyer, 1997)

Join infants during meal times and use this time to develop relationships. Support language development by talking to infants and encouraging them to communicate.



enough furniture and equipment to meet each infant's individual needs. Space for children's belongings should be easily accessible and conveniently located for you and the children. This arrangement will help you follow the individual schedule of each child.

During feeding, you support an infant's development. Younger infants, who are held, looked at, talked to and cuddled by a caregiver while being fed, will feel safe and secure. You support independence when older infants sit at appropriately sized tables and chairs, which encourages them to communicate with one another and enjoy a meal together. Eating time should be relaxed and unhurried because children need time to socialize and practice learning how to eat.

When diaper changing, take time to set up the changing area before approaching the infant. Once you are ready, look at and acknowledge the infant by saying, "I am going to take you for a diaper change." Wait for the infant's response to your words, whether verbal or non-verbal. Be respectful and flexible. If the child is not ready you may say, "I see you are not ready yet, I'll be back in a little while," or "I see you are still playing with the cars. Let's drive the car to the change table and park it nearby while we change you. Then you can play with it again when we are all done."

While changing the child's diaper, speak directly to the infant about each step in the diapering process, rather than distracting the child with a mobile or picture. Use this time to build on the relationship between you and the



Relationships develop through all kinds of interactions, including ones that can happen during what some adults call chores. Think about how diapering is a time when caregivers and children are in a one-on-one situation. If you count up all the diapering in a child's life, the total comes to about four thousand. Imagine the opportunities lost if adults focus only on the "chore" and don't interact with the child.

(Gonzalez-Mena and Widmeyer Eyer, 2004)

child. Explain to the child what is happening and wait for the child to respond to you. For example, say “I need to take off your pants...”, then wait for the child to respond by relaxing his legs so that you can easily remove the pants. Continue the diaper change using comments such as, “I am going to wipe you now. Does that feel better? Now I am going to get another wipe for our hands.”

Since diaper changing is an intimate and private moment for infants, take time to make it as responsive and personalized as possible. Co-operation between infants and staff will happen when you are attentive and allow infants to be a partner in their care. Provide an interaction full of participation and conversation, rather than rushing through the routine as an unavoidable chore. This is a learning opportunity that provides important and rich one-to-one interaction.

Sleeping times for infants change frequently; younger infants may take more short naps, while older infants may need fewer, longer naps. If an infant needs a morning nap, you must find a way to meet this child’s needs as well as the needs of the remaining children in the group. For example, you may choose to divide infants into smaller groups so that one staff person can stay indoors

with the infants who are asleep while another staff person takes the remaining infants for active play outdoors. It is a good idea to store each child’s blanket in an individual cubby in your room to make it easily accessible when the child is ready to nap. Provide a safe place for an infant to sleep, even while others are awake and playing. The safest, most comfortable place for an infant to sleep is in a crib, located where adults can visually supervise and regularly check on the infant (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). Children can feel vulnerable during nap time, especially if they are alone in a dark room. Some infants need support and soothing by a caregiver’s touch or kind words to fall asleep calmly and without stress.

Relax and take time during caregiving routines to focus on each infant. Create positive interactions to build your relationship and support the development of each infant during these routines. Think critically and reflect on what you do, what you say, and how you respond to infants. Record each caregiving routine for use in planning and to share with families. To maximize these learning experiences, caregiving routines need to be positive experiences between you and the infant, where you are both present and in the moment.



Babies should know what to expect each step of the way when you are dressing, diapering, washing, grooming, or feeding them... predictability leads to a sense of security for babies... predictability also leads to co-operation.

(Gonzalez-Mena, 2008)



Talk about what you are doing; listen for the child to respond with her level of language. Look for clues about her health, emotional well-being. Share a personal one-on-one moment. This is too rich an opportunity to be called custodial. Someone described the time older children are waiting in line or waiting for a turn as evaporated time. Are we letting time evaporate while we are changing diapers, spoon feeding infants, or rocking them to sleep; or are these precious opportunities to bond with each other, learn new words, or enjoy the thrill of new flavours?

(Miller, 2001)

Ask yourself:

- What do the caregiving routines I provide feel like from the infant's point of view?
- How much time do I spend talking to each infant during each routine?
- What do I say to each infant during caregiving routines?
- How do we plan mealtimes, naptimes and diapering/toileting times according to the individual schedule of each infant?
- How do we stay alert to the changing needs of each infant?
- How much time do I spend preparing the environment for positive caregiving routines?
- How do I arrange our space for convenient access to routine caregiving furniture and supplies?
- How do we arrange furniture, equipment and materials to allow for individualized caregiving routines?
- How does the furniture and equipment support self-help and independence?
- How do we limit the number of different caregivers in the group?
- How are the needs of each infant communicated among staff members for consistency and follow-through?
- How do all staff members keep informed of individual infant schedules and any changes?
- How does co-operation among co-workers provide consistency and predictability for each infant?
- How do we get information from families about caregiving routines at home?
- How do we share information about caregiving routines with families?
- How do we incorporate Individual Program Plan (IPP) goals into routine care?
- How do we provide caregiving routines that are respectful, responsive and co-operative?

Play extends their attention span by enabling them to increase the novelty of their environment through their own actions... to encourage concentrated periods of play, you can vary the environment to keep it interesting, call attention to novel stimuli in the environment, and play with children who need encouragement to attend for longer periods.

(Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2009)



Exploration and play

As infants grow, less time will be spent in caregiving routines and more will be spent in exploration and play. As you design play experiences for children, remember that what may be a simple challenge to adults can be fascinating and provide rich learning opportunities for infants. Try to imagine your learning environment from the child's point of view, as they experience the beauty and wonder of everyday moments.

Infants need large blocks of time to learn by exploring at their own pace and level of development. Offer children many different ways to actively investigate materials with their whole body and senses. Encourage them to reach out, touch, explore and interact with other children. Formal group times, such as circle time, are not recommended for infants. It is not developmentally

appropriate to expect children to be able to sit and listen for an extended period of time. Children gain many more developmentally appropriate learning opportunities from self-chosen free play. Instead of planning a group time, give infants play-based opportunities to be successful, yet gently challenged in order to support and enhance their development. For example, place interesting objects near infants to encourage them to reach, move and explore. Infants will develop their attention span when provided with personalized interactions and opportunities to choose what to explore and where to play.

Part of your role as a caregiver is to watch, listen and be near infants for their safety, but also allow them to explore on their own or with peers without adult interruptions. Use this time to observe and document each child's learning and development in a non-intrusive way. Look at the child's face and the toy or object the



Infants do not need to be taught to use toys. Set out open-ended materials and watch children learn by exploring.



Because babies are meant to move, being confined may have serious consequences for their motor and cognitive development.

(Pica, 2010)



child is using. Comment on the child's actions as you write down what you hear and see. Watch and wonder what the child may be thinking. Consider using these questions to identify the interests, abilities and needs of each child during play:

- Specifically, what do you see the infant doing? What cues are they showing you (verbal and non-verbal)? What noises or words do you hear?
- How will you respond to this cue or comment to stimulate thinking and reasoning?
- After giving the infant time to respond, what did you observe? (Remember that responses can be verbal or non-verbal.)
- What do your notes tell you about this infant? Think about your knowledge of child development and the child's abilities. What could be the developmental need or interest? Share your ideas and discuss with co-workers and parents.
- What does this infant need from me? What can I do next? Do routines or transitions need to be changed to build on developmental needs? What interactions or play experiences can I provide to enhance development?

Base your curriculum on your observations of the children so you can meet each infant's individual needs, abilities and interests. Sit or lay down on the floor to interact with infants while they play and explore to

provide them with more learning opportunities. Label their actions: "You are lining up all of the cars on the floor," or "Look Mohammed, J.J. is stepping into his boots." It is important to comment on what the children are doing, then watch, wait and respond. Extend play by adding props or making comments. Ask how an object feels, or add a blanket and sing "Rock-a-Bye-Baby" as the infants pretend to rock a baby to sleep. Children will join in when they are interested in what you are doing. As you interact with the children, watch and learn along with them to gain insight about what they are experiencing. You do not need to be an entertainer for young children. Active exploration, interaction with adults and peers, and play with open-ended materials will promote each child's learning and development.

"At every age, a safe environment is one that has a challenge level that meets and stretches children's developing abilities. It should have many more features that invite safe child-environment interaction, rather than features that require rigorous and continual adult monitoring. For example, when children begin to climb, there needs to be safe ways for them to climb, not adult prohibitions on climbing because of risky structures in the environment" (Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2009). Learning through exploration and play is enhanced in a well-prepared, thoughtful environment that is safe, healthy and interesting to the children who use it. The play space should include opportunities for: gross and fine motor play, blocks, water, sand, creative art, science, imitative or dramatic play, reading, and music and movement. There should also be a cozy area with soft toys so children



Face-to-face interactions and responsive, engaged relationships provide the foundation of all child development. Television cannot provide the responsive, engaged relationships and experiences that scaffold early childhood development.

(Royal Children's Hospital, 2009)

can have a comfortable place to relax or be soothed by cuddling toys or sitting with a staff member. You must consider each child's abilities, interests and needs to set up an encouraging environment.

Children need environments that support development through safe exploration and play both indoors and outdoors. All children need space and time for active physical play on a daily basis. Infants need floor time that does not restrict their movements so they can reach, roll and crawl. Young children need space to learn and practice how to walk, run and stretch. Placing children in equipment such as exer-saucers, swings, car seats, play pens and jolly jumpers instead of creating safe play spaces on the floor restricts children's natural

movements. It also limits their opportunities to explore and actively investigate their learning environment.

Even the youngest infants need time to play outdoors and to spend time connecting with nature. You should include time for infants to be outside on the grass or in the snow. Your outdoor play areas should include some natural elements such as grass, sand, plants, trees, and feeders to attract animals. Provide outdoor active play every day so children can exercise their large muscles, rather than experiencing the outdoors from a stroller. By defining separate spaces or through creative scheduling, provide a separate outdoor play space away from older children so infants can safely and independently explore, play, learn and develop.

Your indoor environment should provide open, accessible space for children so they can discover and learn by using hands-on materials in play with peers. Defined space and organized materials provide indirect guidance and promote children's constructive play. You support independence by arranging materials by type in open bins on low shelves so children can find play materials easily. Infants need to be able to explore on their own, by choosing where, what and how to play.



Arrange materials by type in open bins on low shelves so children can find play materials easily. Infants need to be able to explore on their own, by choosing where, what and how to play.

Open-ended play materials enable infants to use them in many different ways. Providing blank paper instead of colouring sheets and a variety of loose parts rather than plastic toys or electronics will encourage children's cognitive development, creativity and motor skills. Set up the environment with simple materials, such as baskets, pots and pans, pieces of fabric and other loose parts. Provide safe opportunities for children to explore sensory materials or items from nature on a come-and-go basis.

Include some duplicate play materials in each area to support parallel play and avoid waiting times for children to use popular items. It is not developmentally appropriate to expect infants to share toys or take turns without adult help. Consider the amount of materials that you provide to ensure that children have choices yet are not overwhelmed by too many toys or clutter. Include materials for a variety of developmental needs and abilities to give all children the opportunity to participate and learn in a meaningful way.

TV, videos and computers are not appropriate in a learning environment for young children. In fact, research shows "screen time" is actually harmful to infants. The American Academy of Paediatrics (2011) recommends that children under the age of two do not watch any television and instead participate in interactive, developmentally appropriate play with peers.

Play is an experience or activity that is obviously enjoyed by the children involved. Despite its fun nature, play cannot be considered frivolous, a waste of time, or an activity to be put aside in order for children to focus on "real learning." Play has intrinsic value far beyond a way to fill time. Play provides unlimited possibilities for learning and development.

Smith and Pelligrini (2008) state that "...play is often defined as activity done for its own sake, characterized by:

- **means rather than ends** (the process is more important than any end point or goal)
- **flexibility** (objects are put in new combinations or roles and are acted out in new ways)
- **positive effect** (children often smile, laugh, and say they enjoy it) [emphasis and bullets added]."



Play nourishes every aspect of children's development – it forms the foundation of intellectual, social, physical, and emotional skills necessary for success in school and in life.

(Canadian Council on Learning, 2006)

Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2008) define play as:

- pleasurable and enjoyable
- with no extrinsic goals
- spontaneous
- involving active engagement
- generally engrossing
- often having a private reality
- non-literal
- containing a certain element of make-believe [bullets added].



Everything in the infant's environment contributes to brain development – noise, light, and changes in temperature; the touch, voice, and smell of her caregiver.

(McCain, Mustard and Shanker, 2007)

Play materials and displays should respectfully reflect diversity and inclusion in a real and positive way. For example, use materials such as books, photos, pictures, posters, dramatic play dishes, utensils, foods, clothing, people, figures and dolls that show a variety in ages, abilities, races, cultures and genders. Using these items in play with children exposes them to similarities and differences in a positive way. Commercialized cartoon characters are not meaningful or realistic. Instead, post pictures of familiar people or animals and objects used in everyday events. Thoughtfully display children's artwork, and photos of the children and their families within easy reach. Infants feel comforted when they can see and touch familiar items from home such as a toy or a photo of a pet. It is important to display materials depicting the

regular experiences of infants so they can see themselves and their families reflected in your program.

It is your job to provide curriculum for the children's optimum growth and development. Strive to make the exploration and play environment a place where the children want to be – where they are comfortable and feel they belong. Follow the infants' interests and provide for what may be coming next in development, when the children show they are ready. You can arrange all aspects of exploration and play – interactions and relationships, space, displays, materials, schedules and transitions – to meet each infant's individual needs. When you consider needs, abilities and interests, and children are encouraged to make choices, learning is more meaningful.

Ask yourself:

- When not involved in caregiving routines, are infants free to move and explore the play environment for most of the day? Why is this important?
- What is our role during play and exploration?
- How do we encourage infants to play together?
- How do we encourage individual expression during play and exploration?
- Where is the space for infants to explore? Does it meet their need to explore and investigate?
- How do we arrange our play space to encourage exploration and interactions?
- Where have we created a place for children's active, physical play?
- Where have we created a cozy place for children to be alone, relax and experience bonding relationships?
- What soft items have we provided for children's relaxation and comfort?
- How do we provide play materials to support exploration?
- How many materials should we make accessible so children do not have to wait?
- What materials are within reach of the children? How do we decide what these materials will be?
- How do we ensure non-mobile infants have access to a variety of play materials?
- How do we ensure that all children can access the play materials that meet their needs, interests and abilities?
- How are materials adapted to meet a variety of individual needs?
- How are daily schedules and activities adjusted to fit infants' needs?
- Where are spaces for each child's family and culture to be represented?
- How does the environment reflect the diversity of our children, families and community?
- How do we incorporate Individual Program Plan (IPP) goals into exploration and play?
- Does the play space have everything the children need to develop to their fullest potential? How do we ensure this?

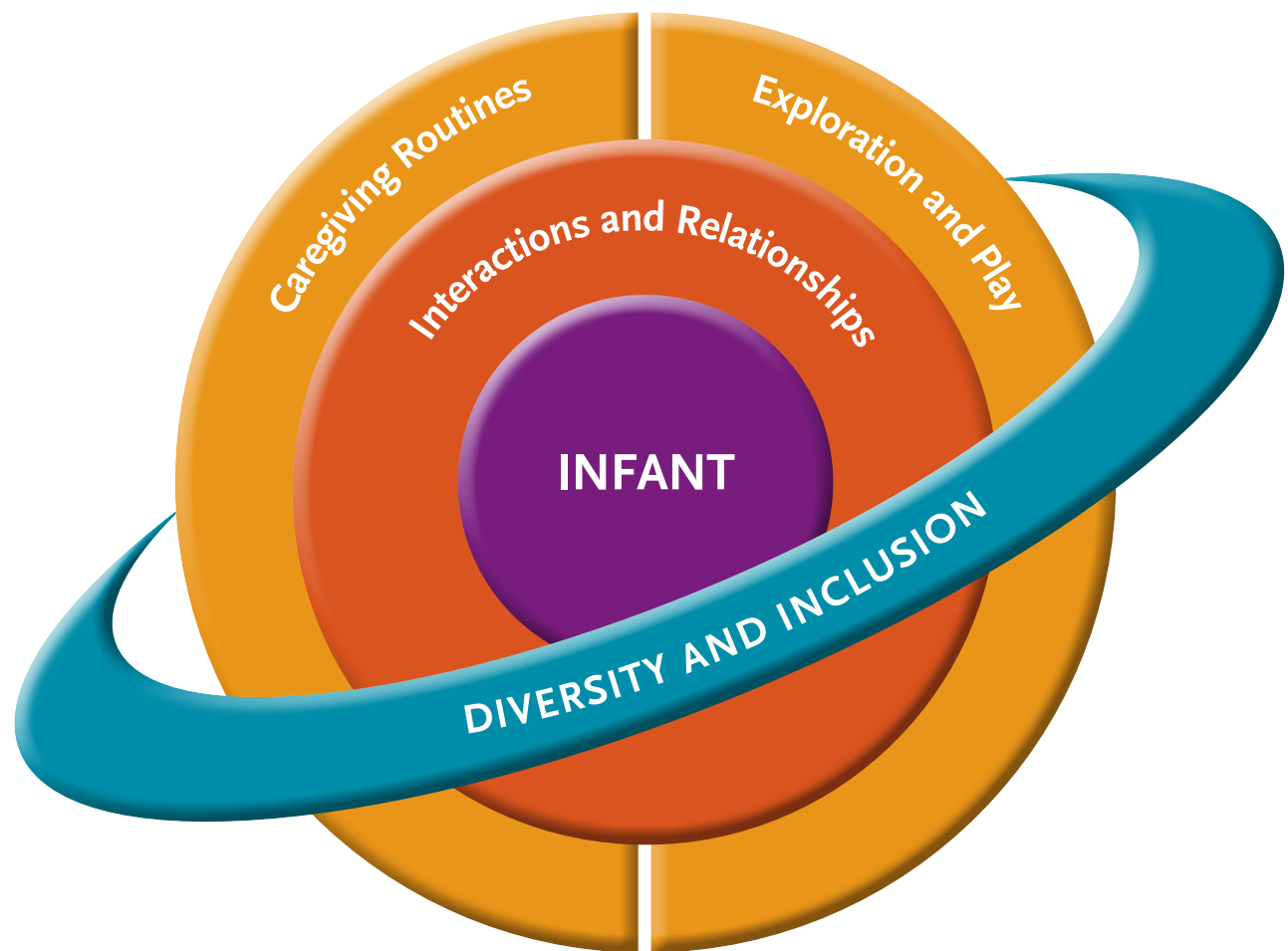


*Sometimes a curriculum labelled 'play-based' now involves adults teaching specific skills through structured 'funlike' activities or requiring all children to perform the same learning tasks. That type of 'work disguised as play' is not developmentally appropriate for an infant/toddler curriculum (Bergen 1998, 2000). **Rather, young children's freely chosen play should be the medium through which their development and learning occur** [emphasis added].*

(Bergen, Reid and Torelli, 2009)

Early Returns:

Manitoba's Early Learning and Child Care Curriculum Framework For Infant Programs



The infant is the centre of your curriculum. Infants are supported by responsive interactions and trusting relationships between each child, family and member of staff. Infant curriculum is the way you design caregiving routines, and exploration and play to create learning opportunities. You support diversity and inclusion by meeting each infant's individual needs, and representing similarities and differences in a positive way.

Developing an ELCC curriculum statement

For infant programs, curriculum is the way you design caregiving routines, and exploration and play to create learning opportunities. Curriculum for infants is based on responsive interactions and positive relationships between each child, family and staff, and supports diversity and inclusion. The infant is the centre of curriculum, so staff plan for and respond to infants according to children's development as well as their abilities, interests and needs. Your curriculum must support and reflect the children, families and community that you serve.

Your Curriculum Statement describes how you organize learning opportunities for infants to best meet their individual needs. Infant curriculum will be strongly influenced by your beliefs and values about how children learn and develop.

A written Curriculum Statement helps families understand your curriculum and how you will support their children, both individually and as part of the group. It is useful for program planning, evaluating your practices and staff orientation. Your Curriculum Statement gives you the opportunity to share how your program is unique and what takes place to foster growth, learning and development for all children. Your Curriculum Statement should be based on your program's philosophy and reflect *Early Returns: Manitoba's ELCC Curriculum Framework for Infant Programs*.

Infant programs have different philosophies and may use different types of curriculum approaches. Regardless of your approach, your curriculum will be based on your plans, systems and processes, used with intention and purpose. "Informal learning does not mean education is unplanned or haphazard" (Epstein, 2003). All approaches to curriculum must include thoughtful planning to enhance the learning and development for each infant in your program.

Developing a clear Curriculum Statement will help you carry out intentional, purposeful caregiving routines and provide exploration and play options that create meaningful and relevant learning opportunities for children. Providing a curriculum for infants, based on positive and responsive interactions and relationships, will also strengthen your accountability to children, parents, management and the public.

Once you have reflected on the curriculum you provide, consider the following questions to evaluate your beliefs and practices. Understanding your beliefs and practices will help you better describe your curriculum.

How do we support children's learning and development?

- What do we do?
- How do we do it?
- Why do we do it this way?
- How could others (such as parents or community members) see us doing this?
- What do we know about how infants typically learn and develop?
- What do we know about how individual infants in our program are learning and developing?
- How do we assess our curriculum?

Writing your curriculum statement

As you write the Curriculum Statement for your infant program, answer each of the following questions to describe your process for curriculum planning and implementation. Be thorough, but direct and to the point. Avoid ELCC jargon – clearly explain the meaning of the terms you use. Write about your expectations and actions, not goals.

Consider each question in terms of **both** curriculum components:

1. caregiving routines
 2. exploration and play
- How do staff organize interactions and build relationships to promote learning and development between staff and infants and among infants?
 - How do staff build relationships with families and convey information to parents/guardians about their infant's well-being, learning and development?
 - How do staff organize the space and materials to promote learning and development?
 - How are children's individual schedules accommodated?
 - How do staff organize time and transitions to support learning and development?
 - How do staff identify the connection between each infant's experiences and domains of development?
 - How do staff reflect and represent all infants, their families and the community, and intentionally expose them to similarities and differences in terms of diversity?

After writing your Curriculum Statement, review it and ask yourself:

What would I tell a parent or community member about how we organize learning opportunities for children? Consider adding or revising information based on your understanding of parents and members of the unique community you serve.

Once you have completed your Curriculum Statement, it is important to revisit it often as a staff team. Curriculum is always changing, depending on staff, children, families and the community. Your Curriculum Statement should be formally reviewed and evaluated at least once a year. This will keep the statement consistent with your practices, while you continue to enhance the quality of the ELCC experiences you provide for infants.

Manitoba is committed to supporting quality programming in early learning and child care. *Early Returns: Manitoba's ELCC Curriculum Framework for Infant Programs* is an important way to support quality. It is your responsibility to develop positive relationships with children through caregiving routines, and through exploration and play experiences that incorporate diversity and inclusion. It is also your responsibility to be accountable to children, parents, management and the public while providing a developmentally appropriate curriculum for young children.

It isn't the clever little toys that you provide or activities you do with the children that make a difference. It's the day-to-day living, the relationships, the experiences, the diaperings, the feedings, the toilet training, and the playing that contribute to intellectual development. And those same experiences help the child grow physically, socially and emotionally as well.

(Gonzalez-Mena and Widmeyer Eyer, 2004)



Babies are born explorers. Infants belong in the rain. They belong outside in the grass and dirt. They belong on the floor with materials that will engage their senses and minds – stimulating them but not overstimulating them the way too many of today’s “educational” toys tend to do.

(Johnson, 2010)



Internet Resources

Canadian Child Care Federation

www.cccf-fcsge.ca

Centre on the Developing Child – Harvard University

www.developingchild.harvard.edu

Children & Nature Network

www.childrenandnature.org

Child Care Exchange

www.childcareexchange.com

Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development

www.child-encyclopedia.com

The Science of Early Child Development

www.scienceofecd.com

Zero to Three National Centre for Infants Toddlers and Families

www.zerotothree.org

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Note: The resources marked with an asterisk (*) may be particularly helpful for staff to use in the process of developing their own curriculum.

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For more information, please contact Child Care Information Services at 204-945-0776 in Winnipeg toll free 1-888-213-4754

or visit manitoba.ca/childcare

Available in alternate formats upon request.

