

# THE SCIENCE OF KIDS AT PLAY (KAP)

## Issue One: Early Childhood Education Curriculum

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Research continuously demonstrates that “the early years of child development set the stage for learning, behaviour and health throughout the life cycle.” (A Time for Learning, A Time for Joy, MB Ed. Resource for Kindergarten Teachers, p.48). Brain development is happening so rapidly in these early years – every minute counts – and *everything is curriculum*. High quality, rich and diverse learning and living environments, that promote children’s deep engagement in play based processes of learning, is best developmental practice in these early years. This issue focuses on different elements of the ECE approach to learning.

### ECE Curriculum is a dance between...



**Theories of Child Development**—ages, stages



**Play**—theories, environment, essential play centres, diverse materials...



**Emergent Interests of the children**—authentic inquiry...



**People, places, culture, time...**

### Early Childhood Educator (ECE) Certification

ECEs are certified provincially after completing 2 years of full time trade training. Extensive focus is placed on understanding and facilitating optimal and holistic child development in social, emotional, physical, and cognitive domains. Learning play theory, and the art of how to optimize play as the vehicle for children’s learning, is another primary focus that spans 2 years.

Included in this rigorous training program, are 6 practicums, in licensed childcare settings, under the supervision of ECE mentors.

In our division we have a broad array of certification amongst our KAP Instructors and Assistants. Some Instructors do not have their ECE classification, some have teaching degrees from other countries that include a specialty in the early years, some have 20+ years of experience, some have other diplomas/certificates that beautifully compliment their work in our programs. Nadine, our KAP Instructor at SAE is, not only classified as an ECE three with a specialty in inclusion, but also just completed her certification as a Forest School Practitioner!! This land based pedagogy naturally and beautifully integrates Indigenous approaches and knowledge as it focuses on developing an early connection with nature, which, in turn, creates the foundation for lifelong environmental stewardship. This will also be our professional learning focus for KAP this year!!



### Theories of Child Development

Red River College created, and is host to, the now internationally acknowledged, multimedia online training resource called “The Science of Early Childhood Development”. In Manitoba we can access this brilliant resource for free! Check it out at: <https://content.scienceofecd.com/mbaccess/>

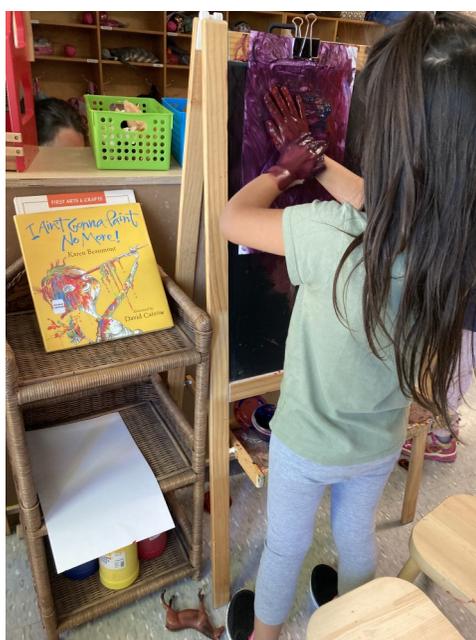
Childhood has been thoroughly researched for hundreds of years! ECEs learn many foundational theories, milestones, diversity, and approaches to when and how to break down and teach developmental tasks. This knowledge feeds our KAP instructors intentional pedagogy as they respond to, and plan for, the extremely broad range of abilities and diversity of prior experiences of our youngest students.

ECEs know that development cannot be skipped, side tracked, cheated or rushed. They have core values that respect the holistic process, that all people need to go through, as they journey through this life.

ECEs have an “image of child” - beliefs about children as strong, capable, unique, gifted people who are contributors through multiple ways of knowing and being in this world.

ECEs strive to follow approaches that honor children and the vulnerability and beauty of childhood. They act as guide in an uncertain and diverse world. They create optimal conditions for wonder, for growth, for feeling, for healing, for learning, for being. They balance the needs for nurturing and guidance. And they dance within the ‘zone of proximal development’ scaffolding children to their next milestone.

There are so many variables that impact development. Like a burgeoning orchid, getting the conditions just right for children’s optimal growth takes knowledge, skill, art and a whole lot of patience.



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## Issue One: Early Childhood Education Curriculum...continued

### Facilitating ECE Curriculum is both science and art...

#### Play

All humans play...their whole lives. It might look a little different as an adult, as we might label it leisure or hobbies, but at its core, it is play. Play is a critical element of human development and well-being. It was not surprising that mental health was so impacted by covid closures...as so much of the play was taken away. Play is so critical to children's development and well-being that the fundamental right to play is even included in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child!

There are many theories that outline best practice in fostering play that promotes high quality holistic development. Essentially play is the vehicle through which children learn about themselves and the world around them. And through these hands-on authentic experiences, children investigate, experiment, observe, problem solve and learn to think critically.

Environment and materials (toys) matters a great deal in fostering the type, and quality, of play we are intentionally promoting for the unique children in our care. There is a key theory outlining how the environment acts as the third teacher both in promoting play and communicating expectations. What materials are available, and how they are presented, will provoke a certain response, inquiry or exploration. How the environment is set up to promote social dynamics is also relevant, as children's play evolves from solitary, to parallel, to associative and finally to cooperative.

High quality play experiences in early childhood sets the trajectory of brain architecture long term, and builds the foundation for lifelong learning. Fun fact, the language centres in children's brains are at their most sensitive stage for learning at around age 3!! The quality of children's oral language environments, and the play children engaged in, specifically in their socio-dramatic and symbolic play opportunities, have direct links to lifelong literacy. Future issues of "The Science of KAP" will be dedicated to the vast topic of play.



#### Emergent Interests of the Children— "I want to be a dragon" (don't we all!!)

Emergent curriculum is rooted in a belief and value of the child as the protagonist in their learning. It is one of the more current approaches to intentional planning for play based learning, and supports development through authentic child led inquiry.

Emergent curriculum stems from the interests of children and relies on the ECEs' knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice. It requires energy, flexibility, observation, listening skills and commitment. To begin, an ECE sets up the room with activities that they think might be of interest to the children, then, an attuned ECE will observe and listen to the children as they play in order to learn about their thinking processes and interests. Those observations are then used as a provocation to intentionally plan experiences and opportunities that match children's needs and interests. This might be based on perhaps a child's misunderstanding or a wondering, or a concept they are exploring. The wise ECE aims to go on a learning journey with children, weaving developmental and learning intentions into these interests in spontaneous, planned, child led and teacher led opportunities and projects. Throughout the day, week, month, ECEs respond to children's interests by planning and providing props and materials that elaborate on and extend the play interests that emerge.



Emergent curriculum promotes an iterative cycle that delves deeper into concepts in an authentic and meaningful way, as each play experience gives way to more questions. In KAP, we strive to follow the child's lead in their learning, and customize the environment to optimize holistic developmental outcomes.

#### People, Places, Culture, Time...

There are many universal aspects of childhood that know no cultural or gender boundaries. Equally, there are many influences like people, places, culture and time that affect what children are exposed to, values and beliefs about learning and childhood, and cultural perspectives that shape experiences and opportunities.

Children's play is connected to both historical and contemporary issues. Just as children made up the song "Ring around the rosy" in the time of the black plague...we too saw children play all sorts of covid "games" as they tried to make sense of it all. The Canadian context, Truth and Reconciliation, environmental impacts, changes in family structures, and the evolution of gender flexibility are all seen in children's play. ECEs are mindful of broadening children's exposure to diversity as they come to understand the world around them.



One thing has always been certain. We know that the investment in early childhood is well worth it in long term outcomes in human capital.

[Check out this video.](#)

<https://www.scienceofecd.com/pages/the-long-reach-of-early-childhood>

