

Summary Report: What does quality in child and family program settings mean?

Our Place advanced the initial learnings and evaluation from the 2016/17 *Early Learning Pedagogy Reflection and Exploration* project with a more in-depth study of how child and family centres foster a child's early learning and transition to school through the application of pedagogy in the home and community. Funded by the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation in 2017/18, through the proposal *Leadership with Families and Community*, Our Place further developed and deepened their understanding and practice of Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years, known as "*How Does Learning Happen?*" (*HDLH*). Building on the adaptations required for implementation of the *HDLH* pedagogy in the child and family support sector (i.e. outside of traditional licensed childcare), Our Place expanded and deepened the pedagogical learnings and accomplishments of the first project by:

- 1) **Championing pedagogical leadership** within universal child and family programs across the Region of Waterloo and acting as a catalyst and positive influence in the development of a common approach to early learning in child and family centres/programs
- 2) Further recognizing the importance and impact of **parental understanding of how their children learn best** by identifying opportunities and invitations for the whole family to deepen understanding of pedagogy and of their role in supporting a child's early learning and transition to school **through employing pedagogy in the home**
- 3) Exploring integration of the foundations in the newly released Ministry of Education Kindergarten Curriculum and building on the *How Does Learning Happen* pedagogy into our early learning programs, **further aligning our approach to expectations of the child in school**

A key realization from our work within the existing initiative is that, in order to delve deeper into understanding and community capacity building, we need to engage the family support sector to a greater degree and connect with professionals from around the Region. We brought our new and existing partners together to form a greater community of learners who have one important thing in common: their work with children and their families.

The Region of Waterloo promotes exploring initiatives to improve the quality of services provided to families. Our Place's work has centered on questioning the effectiveness of our current program delivery in an effort to continuously improve and establish capacity to facilitate effectiveness and relevancy for the children in our community.

This collaborative and reflective process sparked an inquiry: **What does quality in child and family program settings mean to all involved?**

We explored this question in ways where the multiple voices of people that work with families and children in child and family program settings and participants, gathered together to gain a

deeper understanding on what quality means and to identify common threads/themes/elements of quality in the context of everyone's experiences.

The inquiry spread into programs at Our Place as well as off-site locations where facilitators gathered input from over a 100 participants.

Some of the key elements consistently identified are:

- Responsiveness
- Engaging, friendly staff
- Relationships
- Welcoming, inclusive environments
- Opportunities for peer-to-peer connections

Furthermore, Our Place's Pedagogical Team Leaders initiated a Community of Practice to explore this question and bring existing partners together. Seven partner organizations (including the local libraries) participated in a reflective adult learning approach to peel back the layers of meaning associated with the concept of "quality" in their settings. Despite their different environments, policies and practices, the group arrived at the consensus that the most important factors in a quality child and family program setting are:

- Informed qualified staff
- Inclusiveness (welcoming)
- Relationships
- Equitable approaches (vs. being treated "equally")
- Safety and Reliability

These five factors interlock with each other like gears with additional factors presenting themselves in response to a specific setting.

As we reflected on this inquiry process and our findings through the lens of "*How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years*" (HDLH), we identified close connections and elements to support what we gathered from the community.

Relationships and Safety/Reliability spoke to a sense of Belonging and Well-Being:

"When educators establish positive, authentic, and caring relationships with families and provide a safe, non-judgemental environment for shared learning, everyone benefits." HDLH, pg.31

"While these environments need to be safe, it is also important for them to provide children with interesting opportunities for reasonable risk taking." HDLH, pg.29

Inclusiveness / Welcoming environments spoke to a sense of Engagement and Expression:

"Regardless of children's abilities, educator attitudes are critical in fostering children's engagement. When educators believe that all children have the right to participate and when they use inclusive approaches, they are more likely to find ways to reduce barriers, understand how each child learns, and create environments and experiences that are meaningful and engaging. Those in leadership roles in Early Years programs play a critical role in supporting staff, accessing supports, and creating a culture that ensures inclusive practices." HDLH, pg.36

“Working with families and community members to find ways to support and enrich the transmission of language and culture.” HDLH, pg. 44

Informed/ qualified staff as highlighted in The Educator section of the HDLH document:

“The best educators, first and foremost, use a warm, responsive, and inclusive approach, building positive relationships with children, families, colleagues, and communities. Educators participate as co-learners with families and children – learning with children, about children, and from children. Knowledgeable educators get involved in play with children to support development, challenge thinking, and extend learning. They engage in reciprocal relationships with families and caregivers, learning about, with, and from them.” HDLH, pg. 19

Equitable approaches imbedded in the HDLH document highlight one of the ELECT principles for the Early Learning Framework:

“Principle 3: Respect for diversity, equity, and inclusion is vital.” HDLH, pg. 10

Many participants shared their insights after this inquiry experience:

What learning occurred with this experience?

- I recognize that each person has a unique perspective and lens through which they evaluate and determine quality
- This process fostered thinking about how quality differs between child and family/childcare settings and that all the elements of quality programming are intertwined with each other
- Deeper reflection on the elements of quality, meaning making and the various ways of understanding those definitions across different settings
- The value in reflecting and connecting with each other is ongoing and learning is never “done”

How can you apply this learning?

- I will look at the programs I am involved with and reflect on the strengths of these elements within the programs
- I recognize in all programs I am part of the process that matters in terms of quality (how we do what we do with intention)
- I can apply these definitions across different settings. Assess common goals and how they manifest across the community

What would you like to learn more about?

- How current research influences “quality” in family programming for future applications
- How can we connect these aspects of quality to the needs of a community with limited exposure and resources
- How can we as program facilitators contribute to overall larger program and staff growth and professional development from such diverse environments

To continue ongoing inquiry and deepening our understanding of community needs, we invite you to explore the following resources:

How Does Learning Happen? Ontario's Pedagogy for the Early Years

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/childcare/HowLearningHappens.pdf>

Ideas Connect - Conestoga College – Quality

<https://www.ideasconnectconestoga.com/quality>

Early Years Engage – Continuous Quality Improvement in Waterloo Region

<https://www.regionofwaterloo.ca/en/living-here/quality-improvement.aspx>