

The Ministry of Education and Child Care has funded CanAssist at the University of Victoria to lead the Behaviour in the Early Years Initiative. The materials have been developed through the active involvement of the BC child care community and other experts in early childhood development.

Behaviour in the Early Years Position Statement

2023

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*To build a shared frame of reference and understanding of language, **there will be terms written in bold blue font throughout this document.** As you read, you may click on these bolded terms to be brought to their definitions in the rich glossary at the end of this document.*

Scope and Context

The purpose of the *Behaviour in the Early Years* Position Statement is to create a shared vision for understanding and approaching children's behaviours as a community.

This position statement is intended primarily for child care professionals, including managers, directors, owners of child care programs, early childhood educators, early childhood educator assistants, support workers, and responsible adults. However, supporting children is a shared community endeavor, so this position statement can be beneficial for anyone caring for children.

Behaviours occur as actions or reactions in response to situations and stimuli and, can be chronic/long-term, situational, temporary, or reactive. Discourse around behaviour and behaviour support varies depending on past training, personal preferences, cultures, and backgrounds. The language chosen for the position statement reflects the understanding that **behaviour is communication**. Framing **behaviour as communication** helps us understand and reflect on our responses to the behaviours we encounter in child care programs. As inclusive child care professionals, we need to be curious about what the child is experiencing “under the surface” rather than immediately aim to change the behaviour in front of us. We can prepare for both expected and unexpected **behaviours that challenge us** and respond in respectful and inclusive ways.

There are many child-centred strategies that can be used to support their behaviours. The purpose of this position statement is not to provide specific strategies for behavioural support, but to instead create a shared frame of reference for *understanding* behaviour - one with children's well-being and emotional regulation at the centre, shifting away from **compliance**-related outcomes. This perspective serves as the foundation for approaching behaviours inclusively and building child care programs where all children feel a sense of belonging.

Introduction

BC early childhood professionals are essential in building happy, healthy communities across the province. We work with children, families, and community partners to create flexible, respectful, and inclusive programs where all children can play, learn, and grow. **Inclusive child care** describes high quality programs that promote a sense of belonging, participation, and **equity** for all children. In an inclusive child care program, children with a range of skills and abilities can reach their full potential in their own way and at their own pace. Fundamentally, inclusive child care celebrates the strengths and inherent gifts of each child.

All children have different **lived experiences**. Their cultures, families, languages, and unique abilities shape their senses of self and how they understand and interact with the world. As child care professionals, we embrace and honour the diversity of lived experiences. We learn about each child's unique situation and all other factors that contribute to who they are. Beyond individual lived experiences, societal contexts like **ableism**, **colonialism**, and **structural racism** also significantly impact our child care communities. When we build deeper understandings and compassion around a child's lived experience and the societal contexts we exist within, we can recognize the unique vulnerabilities, strengths, and needs of each child and family.

Children express their needs and emotions through all kinds of behaviours. When new sensory, physical, and/or emotional demands arise, behaviour may be the only way a child can communicate their experience. The behaviours they adopt are largely a product of what they have learned through their interactions with adults and peers or through exposure to their communities – their **lived experiences**. Behaviours that occur in child care programs can be long-term, situational, temporary, or reactive.

Guiding Principles for Supporting Children's Behaviours

Supporting behaviours in our child care communities requires understanding the whole child and we must remain curious, responsive, and reflective about the evolving needs of the children and families in our care. To ground our practice, this position statement is based on four guiding principles:

Supporting Behaviour in the Early Years Means:

- 1** Embracing all behaviours as communication and acknowledging that children communicate using behaviour in diverse ways.
- 2** Connecting and reconnecting with the child as an individual. This includes educating ourselves on their cultures, lived experiences, evolving needs, interests, and abilities.
- 3** Creating learning ecosystems through relationships with children, families, & communities and environments that are positive, inclusive, and responsive.
- 4** Supporting a resilient, skilled workforce that is committed to self-location, empathy, and reflection.



FIGURE 1

All Children are Unique: Understanding Behaviour

Humans are constantly engaging in behaviours, whether we are sprinting, sleeping, or doing anything in between. **Behaviours** occur as actions or reactions in response to situations and stimuli, and they begin the moment we are born. There are behaviours we usually know how to do instinctively at birth, such as blinking, sleeping, and crying. However, all other behaviours are learned beginning at infancy and throughout childhood (i.e., using quiet voices indoors, keeping our hands to ourselves) either by observation or explicit instruction.

Later in our development, we can typically use a wider range of communication skills to express our emotions or explain what we need. However, as children grow and learn, their language and **social-emotional skills** may not yet be developed enough to directly communicate their feelings and needs. Therefore, they use behaviours to give us this information, and learning how to respond using our knowledge of each individual child can be a challenging task.

Behavioural responses can be **internalized** or **externalized**, and they may not be easily observable. When children engage in quiet play, daydream, nap, or display symptoms of depression or high anxiety, they are demonstrating **internalized behaviours**. When children argue, yell, hum, sing, laugh, or fidget, they are displaying **externalized behaviours**. Behaviours on all points of the continuum (such as the graphic in *Figure 2*) are equally important to address.

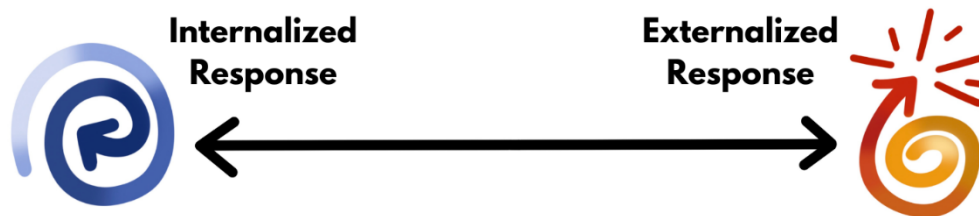


FIGURE 2

We must remain watchful for both externalized and internalized responses, as they help us make sense of what is happening for a child ‘beneath the surface.’ In child care programs, behaviours clue us into children’s emotions, unmet needs, or situational interpretations. These responses may be unexpected, so they can be challenging for us to understand or react to. This is when it is key to form meaningful relationships with the children in our care and their families.

Children’s cultural, social, and developmental backgrounds are important factors to consider when understanding their behaviours. Additionally, current and past experiences of vulnerabilities or trauma can be linked to **behaviours that challenge us**. However, we should never assume the cause and instead be curious, reflective, and responsive. Connecting with children’s families and communities helps us gain a deeper understanding of what can be considered typical behaviour for each child and how we might be expected to respond based on different cultural teachings and practices.

Understanding Our Perception - Self-Reflection, Self-Location, and Self-Compassion

As educators, we prioritize children’s well-being and should always strive to maintain **unconditional positive regard** for all children in our care, regardless of what they say or do. This does not mean we condone or accept all behaviours and their impacts (especially when it causes harm to others), but we should always maintain that each child is deserving of our time, compassion, and care. Unconditional positive regard is seeing and valuing the whole child for who they are. In practice, this means we should constantly remind children that they are valued, even if their behaviour needs to change to keep themselves or the community safe.

Behaviours are often characterized as ‘positive’ or ‘negative,’ as seen in *Figure 3*. When children have unmet needs, they may respond in ways that surprise and challenge us, and we often interpret these behaviours as ‘negative.’ It is important to think of behaviours as neutral actions instead, because when we categorize the behaviour we see on the outside, we can miss what is going on for the child on the inside.

For example, a child sitting quietly at circle time may initially be perceived as behaving ‘positively.’ However, upon further investigation, we may observe that the child is not engaged in the activity. They are withdrawn and may not be processing the auditory information, which signals that they may have an unmet need.

While recognizing our initial perceptions is important, we can take it further by questioning these perceptions and remaining critical of them. Consider why we often associate a quiet child as being ‘good’ and a louder one as being ‘bad.’ These perceptions influence our own actions, so remaining curious and proactive about how we respond to behaviours is fundamental.

Self-Location and Self-Compassion

Self-location is a tool for understanding how our **lived experiences, cultures,** and values influence our perceptions of the world around us, including behaviours. Self-location is knowing where one comes from, who they are connected to, and the lands and culture to which they belong.

Self-location helps us recognize why we are affected by certain behaviours and situations. This awareness helps us take note of our individual **unconscious biases** and makes it possible to respond skillfully and empathetically to children’s behaviours.

Supporting children as they learn, grow, and develop is a demanding and complex job that requires our complete attention. Responding to behaviours that challenge us can be draining (and sometimes even distressing). We must be kind to ourselves and practice **self-compassion**, strengthening our resiliency and building confidence in who we are. Calm, caring, and reflective practitioners create inclusive and responsive learning environments for all children, families, and staff.

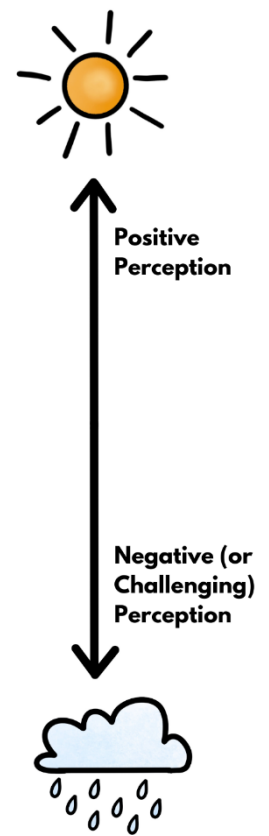


FIGURE 3.

Understanding Behaviour in the Child Care Context

Inclusive child care programs provide children with regular and ongoing opportunities to develop emotional regulation and social skills. Behaviours are not labelled 'positive' or 'negative,' but remain neutral and are understood as tools and cues for getting to know the children in our care. An impartial lens allows educators to understand each child's evolving needs and abilities and determine what skills are still developing. Teaching children **emotional regulation** strategies will help them build an awareness and capacity to respond to situations and stimuli in healthier ways that do not cause harm to themselves or others. However, it is important to remember that strategies and approaches that work for one child may not succeed for another, as every child is unique.

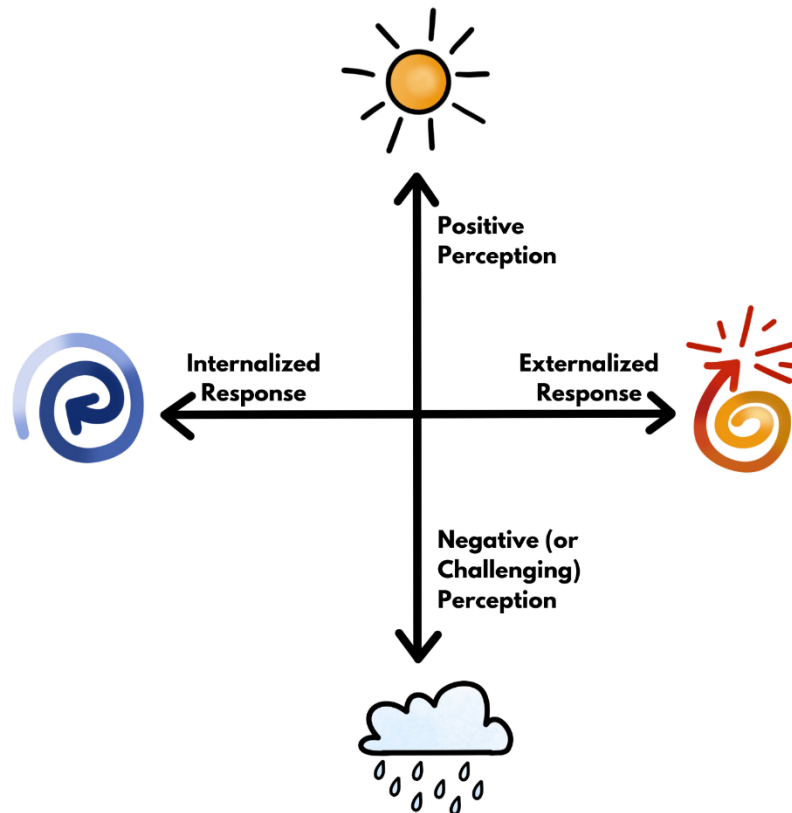


FIGURE 4.

Behaviours are complex, and to understand them we must consider children's responses, our own perceptions, and the interaction between the two (see *Figure 4*). Slowing down and reflecting in this manner allows us to gain clarity, respect children's experiences, and help them work through stressful situations.

Preparing for the expected *and* unexpected while reframing our understanding of behaviour marks a meaningful step towards approaching all behaviours in inclusive and compassionate ways.

Learning Ecosystems: Relationships and the Environment

Approaching children’s behaviour inclusively and compassionately begins *before* the behaviour that challenges us even occurs, starting with strong relationships with children, families, and communities. These relationships, combined with inclusive physical, sensory, and social-emotional environments, come together to create **learning ecosystems** (see Figure 5).

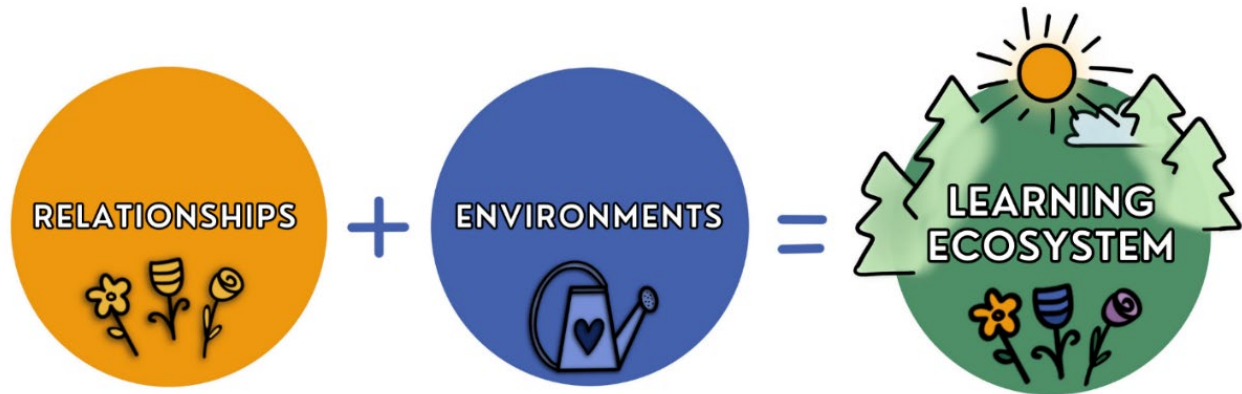


FIGURE 5

Every person—child, educator, family member, or community member—has something to teach *and* learn. This **diversity** is what makes the ecosystem thrive. These ecosystems also shape how children and their families value inclusion, respect diversity, and understand expectations of the learning community. We should always promote respectful and safe behaviours that reinforce empathy and cooperation between children. Educators guide how children talk about (and to) one another, influence how families talk about children, and impact how staff talk amongst themselves. In these environments, maintaining and modelling **unconditional positive regard** for all members of our ecosystems while speaking about them in compassionate, uplifting ways is vital.

The Importance of Relationships

The relationships we build with children, families, and community partners contribute to respectful, inclusive, and responsive programming. These collaborations create a shared frame of reference for understanding behaviour and implementing supports that link to the child's experience at home.

In the early years, children are constantly experiencing new things which may result in behaviours that challenge us. Child care programs provide children with new opportunities to explore boundaries, navigate play customs, and adapt to new people and environments. Through this they rely on adults and peers in their lives to model respectful and inclusive relationships.

Additionally, open and ongoing communication with **community partners** broadens our perspectives and helps us learn new strategies to guide children’s behaviours. This partnership strengthens communities’ and child care professionals’ capacities to be responsive to the evolving needs of the children in their care. Peer relationships help children learn **social-emotional skills**, including **emotional regulation**, empathy, and cooperation, and can help children gain life experiences in ways adults cannot always offer. Ensuring all children can participate comfortably in different activities with their peers also helps foster a sense of understanding, belonging, and security.

The Importance of Environments

Children are deeply affected by **physical, sensory, and social-emotional elements** of their environment, so it is important to notice what elements lead to greater participation and enjoyment as well as what may be a barrier. **Inclusive child care** environments should be dynamic, responsive, and intentionally anticipate the diverse needs, interests, and abilities of all the children within their care. Even in an intentionally planned environment, children will experience stressors. Stressors can be physical, sensory, or social-emotional and may challenge children to interact with the space around them. However, they may not have the skills to identify and express what is not working for them in the environment, which can lead to behaviours that challenge us.

Each child is unique and will have different needs when it comes to the environmental elements (i.e., sounds and smells) around them. Stress responses in children often occur when there is a mismatch between a child's needs or abilities and environmental expectations. For example, some children may become overstimulated by the brightness of lights or high noise levels. Staying curious about which elements of our program or environment can be adapted helps uncover creative solutions to meet children's needs. Noticing what is working and not working in any given environment is an ongoing practice and often requires repeat attempts and flexibility.



FIGURE 6

Inclusive learning ecosystems give all children a chance to learn and expand their **social-emotional and emotional regulation** skills. Repetition and practice strengthen regulation skills, as children have time and space to work through stress responses when provided with a safe, non-judgmental, and calm environment.

Children thrive in **learning ecosystems** where relationships with ourselves, children, families, and communities harmonize with child care environments. Nurturing the learning ecosystem requires pulling in new insights from the relationships and environments regularly and thoughtfully (see *Figure 6*).

Be Curious, Be Responsive, Be Reflective

Reframing our understanding of behaviour and prioritizing relationships and child care environments help us uphold the four guiding principles outlined on page 3.

The *Behaviour in the Early Years* Position Statement helps us collectively frame behaviour as a mode of communication to help us identify children's needs. Supporting a broad range of children's behaviour is a core component of **inclusive child care**. To begin putting this knowledge into practice, we can use the **3 Bes**:

Be Curious

- I ask many questions about the children I care for, such as:
 - How are their needs changing and evolving?
 - Why is this behaviour showing up, and why now?
 - What are their potential stressors?
 - Am I familiar with their individual interests, needs, and abilities?
 - How do their families approach behaviour at home?
 - How am I doing? How do I know what to do next?

Be Responsive

- I self-regulate and 'lend my calm' to co-regulate with children in my care.
- I pause and create time to stay curious and self-locate before I respond.
- I value connecting and reconnecting with the children in my care.
- I communicate regularly with families.

Be Reflective

- I make changes within the environment to support myself and the children in my care.
- I check my perception for accuracy.
- I give myself time to respond effectively and skillfully to children's behaviour that challenges me.
- I reflect on my response: Was it compassionate and calm?
- I communicate respectfully and inclusively with others.
- I seek feedback and support from the wider community: my colleagues, families, and **community partners**.

Conclusion

Every child and family deserve access to behavioural supports within child care programs that honour their diverse needs, skills and abilities. The *Behaviour in the Early Years* Position Statement emphasizes behaviour as a communication tool. This perspective supports child care professionals in their ability to be curious, responsive, and reflective when approaching each unique child and their behaviours. Building relationships and proactively designing environments create inclusive learning ecosystems where all children will thrive, ultimately supporting their emotional regulation skills and well-being. Inclusion in our BC child care programs is the foundation for a strong, compassionate society where all people feel like they belong.

Glossary

ableism - prejudice or discrimination against people with disabilities and can be intentional or unintentional. Incidents of ableism can occur in day-to-day conversations at an individual level or at a systemic level in society when spaces and places are not designed for the full participation of people with disabilities.

behaviour – all responses, whether internalized or externalized, to a situation or stimulus.

behaviour is communication – this phrase represents a concept and tool to help educators recognize that behaviours, including those that challenge us, are often an attempt to communicate interests and unmet needs through the four functions of behaviour: connection, access, sensory, and escape. The behaviours are displayed either internally or externally and may look different for each person depending on their abilities, experiences, and cultural context.

behaviour that challenges us – behaviour to express an unmet need which can be perceived by others as challenging.

colonialism – the systemic structures which are the result of the action or process of taking control of people, land, and waters by an outside entity who then occupies the land, extracts its value, and dominates the people.

community partners – families, Elders, and other organizations and people dedicated to strengthening the quality of child care programs through supportive two-way collaborations. These connections are built through active involvement in program activities, volunteering, outreach, practicum placements, and professional development opportunities, where a shared vision engages resources and provides both parties with diverse perspectives.

compliance – the degree to which children do what they are told. In the context of behaviour, compliance could mean a child will stop or change their behaviour when they are asked. This method will often result in the underlying cause of the behaviour going unnoticed or ignored.

co-regulate (-tion) – an adult’s responsive interaction that helps children interpret and recognize their behaviours; the response is calm and models appropriate emotional and behavioural regulation strategies and provides opportunities that support their social-emotional growth and well-being.

culture – the shared understandings that help groups of people make sense of their worlds and communicate with one another. Culture is a group’s accepted values, traditions, and lifestyles that guide the way people lead their day-to-day lives.

developmental trajectory – this term represents a reframing of the idea of developmental milestones; instead of prescribed milestones, development is viewed as a uniquely varied progression of skills and achievements across an array of domains. It is accepted and honoured that each child will display their own unique progression of skills; some children will develop quickly in some domains but slower in others, while other children will have a different developmental trajectory.

diversity – the different beliefs, customs, practices, languages, behaviours, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and physical differences of individuals and cultural groups. Honouring diversity is based on the principle that differences that are recognized and celebrated benefit our communities. Honouring diversity requires that we encourage understanding, acceptance, mutual respect, and inclusion in order to make schools, communities, and society as a whole more equitable for all people.

dysregulation –occurs when our brains become disconnected from our ability to reason, problem solve, and identify emotions. Self-regulation skills can help to move more quickly between dysregulated and regulated states.

emotional regulation – strategies for managing energy states, emotions, behaviour, and attention; the ability to return to a balanced, calm, and constant state of being.

equity – refers to ideas of fairness and social justice to provide different treatment or special measures for individuals or groups to ensure they have equal opportunities to succeed. Equity does not mean providing the same experiences for every child; instead, it requires educators to recognize and actively deal with often unseen barriers to learning.

externalized responses – different ways children express emotions and needs, such as through laughing, screaming, hitting, kicking, and elopement (running away or wandering off); these behaviours are typically easier to recognize as they are obvious and can be more disruptive.

inclusion – the practice of supporting everyone, including those with extra support needs and disabilities to participate in and contribute to their local communities. Each person can meaningfully engage, learn, contribute to the community, and culture, and maintain meaningful relationships while the community recognizes the value of these practices in strengthening diversity and equity of access (see *Figure 7*).

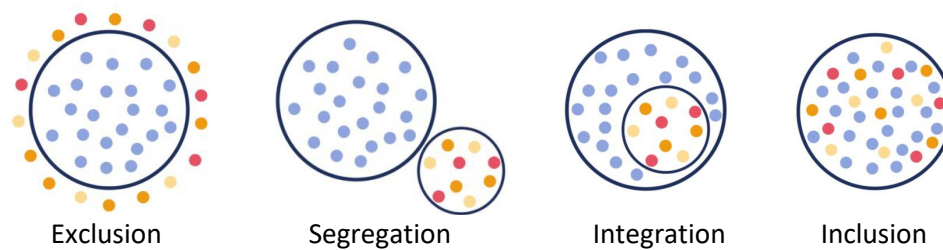


FIGURE 7

inclusive child care – the principle that children of all abilities, including children with diverse abilities and needs, have equitable access to quality learning and child care and are supported to belong and learn through play along with other children in a regular program. Inclusive learning and care programs support the individual strengths and needs of each child, allowing them to meaningfully engage, learn, and contribute to the community and culture of their program. All educators, providers, and families collaborate as a team to meet the needs of children in their programs. The presence and engagement of a diverse group of children, including those with diverse needs, provides significant opportunities to learn about, value, and celebrate diversity in communities.

internalized responses – different ways children express emotions and needs, such as through daydreaming, quiet play, hesitation, disengagement, and disinterest; these behaviours are often more difficult to recognize as they may be less obvious or nondisruptive.

learning ecosystems – the foundation of an effective child care program where respectful, inclusive, and responsive relationships with children, their families, and the wider community come together with inclusive physical, sensory, and social-emotional environmental elements to create a dynamic program where each person has something to teach, learn, and contribute.

lived experiences – all experiences, past or present, that shape the individual and their perception. This includes the depiction of a person's experiences and decisions as well as the knowledge gained from their past.

physical elements – material features of the child care program that are tangible and can prompt distress for children and educators in the child care environment; examples include classroom layout, furniture placement, and accessibility of materials and spaces.

respectful strategies – supportive responses that provide opportunities for judgement-free problem solving, reasonable risk-taking, and social-emotional development, where the goal of the strategy is social-emotional well-being rather than compliance.

self-compassion – practice of experiencing feelings of caring and kindness toward oneself, taking an understanding, nonjudgmental attitude toward one's inadequacies and failures, and recognizing that one's own experience is part of the shared human experience.

self-location – a tool for understanding how our lived experiences, cultures, and values influence how we perceive the world around us, including children's behaviour, by knowing where you come from, who you are connected to, and the territory and culture that you carry.

self-reflective – personal reflection of one's own perceptions, biases, and actions. Taking the time to think about, meditate on, evaluate, and give serious thought to your behaviours, thoughts, attitudes, motivations, and desires. It is the process of diving deep into your thoughts, emotions, and motivations to determine the 'why' behind them.

sensory elements – aspects of the child care program that are perceivable and often changeable, but not necessarily material or tangible; they can prompt distress for children and educators in the child care environment. Examples include temperature, brightness and lighting, auditory characteristics such as volume and echoing, visual complexity, and scents.

social-emotional elements – aspects of the child care program that describe the group culture, relationships, interactions, and program organization and delivery; they can prompt distress for children and educators. Examples include timing and duration of activities, clarity of behavioural expectations and the extent to which they are reasonable, and practices related to inclusion.

social-emotional skills – ability to manage emotions, make good decisions, empathize with others, and build and maintain relationships through understanding your emotions, thoughts, and how they influence your behaviour.

structural racism – the systematic intergenerational accumulation of differential advantage among racial and ethnic groups that result in inequitable access to society's resources – such as clean water, adequate nutrition, healthcare, and education – that stem from the society's historic political, cultural, and social framework.

unconditional positive regard – acceptance, empathy, and support of a person separate from their past or present actions.

unconscious biases – assumptions, beliefs, attitudes, and stereotypes that humans have about different groups to which they are not consciously or overtly aware of.

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