

Keeping In Touch

Staying Connected, Growing Together • Spring 2025



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Welcome

The **Keeping in Touch** (KIT) resource was created to celebrate and support the creativity and dedication of all who participate in the quality education of young children. The resource strives to provide inspiration and knowledge to professionals in the Early Learning and Care Sector through informative articles and resources which promote inclusionary practices, cultural diversity and competence, programming ideas and community information. The KIT committee is comprised of professionals from various agencies within the Toronto Children's Services Every Child Belongs model. We welcome you to share this resource with your colleagues, friends, and family.



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Doing Gender Justice in Early Childhood Settings

RYAN GRACIE, in collaboration with University of Guelph-Humber Fourth-Year Early Childhood Studies Students, Humber Polytechnic Resource Consultant Team

What is gender?

Gender is a **social construct**, an idea created by people to help categorize and explain the world in which we live (Trevor Project, n.d.). It is comprised of 3 key components: our identity (how we feel or see ourselves - as male, female, both or neither) our behaviours (how we express ourselves - as masculine, feminine or some combination of both) and the roles we assume in our everyday lives (like mother, provider, protector, etc.). In many cultures, there is a false belief that gender is linked to our biological sex. They are, in fact, independent of each other. In other words, our sex does not determine our gender any more than it does our sexual orientation. Rather, gender operates independently.

Because there is an inextricable connection forged between sex and gender in Western societies like Canada, it is imperative that we look at this relationship

in terms of identity. For example, people whose gender identity matches their sex at birth (i.e. are born male and identify as male or are born female and identify as female) are said to be **cisgender**. When this alignment does not exist (i.e. a person is born male but identifies as female or is born female but identifies as male), individuals may then be said to be **transgender**. It is important to remember that transgenderism is but one example of a gender diverse identity. In other words, not all people who fail to define themselves as cisgender will see themselves as transgender. In Canada, there are three recognized gender categories: male, female or **non-binary** (Statistics Canada, 2024). Non-binary is an umbrella term that is meant to refer to any gender identity considered outside of the "norm." It is often used interchangeably with the term "gender diverse." Both will be engaged throughout this article to refer to gender identities that are neither cis male nor cis female. Regardless of how one chooses to identify, there is one truth that remains consistent: Gender is one of the most significant ways in which we organize our everyday lives.

What is gender normativity?

Gender normativity is the tendency to reinforce the gender categories of male and female as "normal." This is problematic as, whenever we create normative categories, anything that does not fit into them is automatically considered "abnormal" (Gonzalez-Mena, 2008). This labelling often leads to the unfair treatment of people who situate themselves as non-binary (Anzovino, Oresar & Boutiller, 2021). For instance, according to Egale (2024), there is a "growing reactionary movement threatening the safety, freedoms and rights of [...] trans, non-binary and other gender non-conforming individuals" (p. 1). In fact, between 2016 and 2023, hate crimes motivated by gender and sexual differences rose an astounding 388%, with incidents involving gender non-binary people being especially violent. Clearly, **transphobia** (or the unjustified fear/hatred of transgender people) is very much a reality in this country. It is so insidious that research estimates that around 41% of transgender students in Canada report significant depressive symptoms, 20% had attempted suicide in a single year, and 46% had engaged in self-injurious behaviour

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(Government of Alberta, 2013). Gender normativity is a definite problem that must be challenged if we are to protect our gender diverse children from this fate.

What does gender normativity look like in early childhood settings?

Gender normativity is embedded in the very fabric of our **social institutions** (or structures that teach us what to think and how to behave). Although the family is said to be a primary agent of socialization, early childhood education also factors prominently into shaping children into the adults they ultimately become. In fact, Swindler Boutte (2008) argues that “no single profession touches the lives of children [...] more than education does.” Thus, that gender normativity is embedded in the everyday practices we widely assume to be in the best interests of children is concerning. In fact, Skelton (2022) contends that much effort is put into imposing and naturalizing the cisgender binary in early childhood/elementary school spaces. Problematic practices that are employed and rarely (if ever) questioned include:

- Lining children up according to their gender;
- Using songs, finger plays and storybooks that reinforce gender norms (ex. most fairytales);
- Dividing day care attire into 2 categories: Clothing for boys and clothing for girls;
- Using gendered language with children (ex. calling a girl “pretty” or a boy “handsome”);
- Giving children regular reminders about how important it is that they be a boy or a girl;
- Greeting children as “boys” and “girls”;
- Registration systems and developmental progress reports/report cards populated with “he” and “she” pronouns;
- The failure to honour children’s preferences regarding their preferred pronouns;
- Pink- and blue-coded cubby/name tags;
- Having different expectations for children’s behaviour, achievements and athletic abilities;
- Sex-specific activity prompts and requirements

that children line up, sit or engage in other activities in boy-girl-boy-girl fashion;

- Sex-specific dress codes.

Approaches to the care and education of young children that is gendered in this manner usually occurs unconsciously, by well-intentioned early childhood educators who are often simply trying to support children’s budding identities. In other words, it is not likely that someone deliberately perpetuates gender normativity. Whether conscious or unconscious, the lived effects are still the same - the reproduction of the cis gender binary that validates just two gender identities which in turn makes it increasingly difficult for children who breach normative boundaries.

How can I challenge gender normativity to create a space that promotes gender justice?

Gender justice refers to the equal treatment of all genders, ensured through the extension of access to the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities that individuals who identify as cis gender have by virtue of their construction as the dominant gender group (Strategic Advocacy for Human Rights, 2024). “It is a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of gender discrimination and ensures that [...] gender minorities are not excluded from the full enjoyment of their human rights” (Strategic Advocacy for Human Rights, 2024, para. 4). Gender justice is both a philosophy and a repertoire of strategies that seek to eradicate gender normativity and dismantle the cis gender binary that elevates men and women to the top of a gender hierarchy. Early Childhood Educators who are ambassadors for gender justice in the classroom, engage in practices that are inclusive of all expressions of gender, especially those that are diverse in nature. This may include (but is not limited to):

- Acting in accordance with the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which asserts that children have a right to live a life free of discrimination; the right to an identity and the right to have their views respected.

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The Early Learning Environment

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- Supporting cross gender play when, for example, a boy wears a dress in the dramatic play area, or a girl enjoys rough and tumble play with their male peers.
- Challenging genderist language and behaviours exhibited by children and adults alike, using these as teachable moments for expanding perceptions of what is possible regarding gender-related behaviours.
- Surveying the environment and materials for gender normative messages and providing alternatives that recognize multiple expressions of gender.
- Referring to children by their preferred gender pronouns.
- Advocating for access to appropriate supports and resources for all gender diverse children, especially those who self-identify as transgender.
- Infusing gender diversity throughout the curriculum, providing children with ample exposure to multiple gender identities.
- Rethinking traditional understandings of the "whole child" by recognizing and supporting important milestones pertaining to the development of gender awareness and gender identity.
- Avoiding the tokenist or tourist approach to including gender diversity in the curriculum by, for example, placing a single book on the bookshelf that challenges gender norms or posting photos of gender diverse people in the environment without making them meaningful in any way.
- Maintaining open and honest communication with families who convey a sense of discomfort with gender inclusivity all the while remaining committed to ensuring that all expressions of gender are celebrated in the classroom.

It takes unconditional care, compassion and commitment to create safe spaces for children who are gender diverse. It is no easy feat. But it is a mission that, when undertaken with unwavering resolve, has the potential to cultivate early childhood spaces that are sites of hope, harmony and humanity for all.

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“From the beginning children demonstrate that they have a voice, know how to listen and want to be listened to by others.”

— Carlina Rinaldi

Importance of the Classroom: Part 2 – Interactions and Their Influence on the Classroom Environment: Evidence-Based Strategies

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This article is a continuation of Importance of the Classroom: Part 1, found in [Keeping in Touch, Spring 2024](#).

Classroom interactions play a pivotal role in shaping the environment of a learning space. The quality of interaction between educators, children and their peers directly impact children's social-emotional development and overall engagement. Implementing evidence-based practices and strategies, ensures that classroom interactions are intentional, inclusive and conducive to learning that allows trust, collaboration and active learning to occur.

Interactions are the foundation for any setting. Our verbal and non-verbal communication directly impacts the children's responsiveness and learning. Research by Hamre and Pianta (2007) emphasizes that classrooms with positive interactions and engagement between educators and children, promote better academic and social outcomes. Educators who model collaboration through hands-on experience, along with encouraging peer interactions, play a critical role in shaping a positive environment. This allows children to develop diverse perspectives, build empathy, and practice problem-solving skills (Pianta et al., 2008).

When educators are actively listening and engaging with children, it validates their thoughts and feelings, making them feel valued. Evidence suggests that when educators listen attentively and respond thoughtfully, children are more likely to engage actively in classroom discussions (Cornelius-White, 2007).

Collaborative learning is also an important skillset that children learn through peer interactions. During these positive interactions, it is critical to acknowledge

and reward positive behaviours. Behaviour-specific praise, as recommended by Simonsen et al. (2008), helps reinforce desired behaviours while promoting a growth mindset. Finally, recognizing and valuing children's cultural backgrounds and neurodivergent minds enriches classroom interactions. Gay (2002) emphasizes culturally responsive teaching as a way to connect with children meaningfully and foster inclusivity.

Classroom interactions significantly influence the learning environment, shaping children's academic and emotional outcomes. By adopting evidence-based practices such as active listening, positive reinforcement, and culturally responsive teaching, educators can create a supportive and dynamic classroom atmosphere. Ultimately, these strategies cultivate an environment where all children feel valued and empowered to learn.

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Communication and Interactions Tip Sheet

BRENDA WILSON, RECEAS, Montessori, Resource Consultant, Terry Tan Child Centre

Effective and compassionate communication helps build a trusting, safe and secure environment for all. In our interactions with each other and the children we care for, we strive every day to build a program that provides a sense of Belonging, Well-Being, Engagement and Expression. (**How Does Learning Happen?** Four foundations of optimal learning) Communication that supports these principles, contributes to:

- Developing self-confidence
- Developing healthy relationships with ourselves and others
- Creating a pleasant atmosphere to learn and grow in
- Developing positive feelings and thoughts about ourselves and others
- Encouraging co-operation, feelings of worth and warm relationships
- Paying attention and extending the children's thoughts and ideas
- Richer vocabularies and more knowledge of each other

When we use open, honest, and considerate communication, we create invitations to:

- Say more
- Share ideas and feelings
- Show others we are listening and are interested
- Let others know their ideas are important and they are accepted and respected

Examples of conversation extenders are:

I see. / Oh. / Mm hm...

How about that!

Really?

Tell me more about...

I wonder what...

That's interesting.

What else?

I notice that you...

Say that again. I want to be sure I understood you.

Can you show/tell me more about...

Creating the atmosphere in the program is more than the physical room arrangement. It involves our tone, body language, and the words we use. Smiling, nodding, widening eyes, lifting hands, tilting of the head, curious and enthusiastic voices and well thought out words, help to define your program as a welcoming, interesting, and respectful learning environment.

- Let children tell you about their thoughts without interruption – from beginning to end – whenever possible.
- Allow children the time to help you get to know them better. Give them personal and thoughtful feedback.
- Practice self-esteem builders with the children in your care:

- Keep a record of all accomplishments
- Create opportunities for activities they enjoy
- Help them set goals and achieve them
- “Get to know you” games:

27 Name Games for Kids to Start the Year

- Catch the Compliment

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The Benefits of Taking a Short Body Pause Break Every Day

JOSIE IANNACCIO, RECE, ECAS, BASc, Humber Resource Consultation Services, Resource Consultant, Humber Polytechnic

Do you ever feel like you have been on the go or have not moved from your desk all day? At times, we may feel stressed, busy, or overwhelmed, and have forgotten about what it feels like to be completely calm and relaxed. What does it feel like or what can it feel like to take a true body pause break? Listed below are some tips that can help you get back to taking a body pause break during the workday.



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- Take advantage of stretching during your work break, especially if you have been standing for a lengthy amount of time. Click on the following link for seated stretching ideas: [**5 Minute Seated Stretch - Quick Chair Yoga Work Break for Beginners**](#)
- Alternate between sitting and standing when attending virtual online meetings or trainings.
- Step away from all technology and temporarily turn off notifications if you can; sit quietly when taking a body pause break.
- Practice breathing exercises in or outside of the classroom or office to relax and energize. This is a great co-regulation teaching tool for children too!
- Choose a book of interest. Read and/or write down a few quotes that can help with feeling inspired.
- Drink water throughout the day and really notice how this makes you feel when nourished and refreshed. Try adding cucumber or lemon to your water for some extra refreshment, to prevent dehydration and additional benefits.
- Take a short walk or eat your lunch outside to get some fresh air away from your workspace. Take in nature.
- Play a board game during your break or lunch. Games can be fun and rejuvenating, create opportunities for laughter and are good for your health.
- Eat a healthy snack, have special “potluck healthy snack days” with your team, raising awareness for self-care and team-care.

Keep in mind that relaxation can be different for everyone. It is important to replenish our bodies with new routines/self-care habits which will help build individual workday balance. Choose a tool or tip that is reflective of you! Body pause breaks can be quick, restorative, and enjoyable. Have fun with it!

5 Tips for Encouraging Picky Eaters to Try New Foods!

LICA CHEUNG, Nutrition and Healthy Lifestyle Promotion student at Humber Polytechnic

1: Make it Fun & Engaging

- Turn meals into an adventure!
- Example: "Let's see if this carrot makes a crunchy sound!"



Picky eating is typical! Kids are exploring textures, flavours, and independence. Patience and positive strategies work better than pressure.

2: Offer, Don't Force

- Pair new foods with familiar favourite foods.
- Let kids explore food by touching or smelling before tasting.



3: Get Kids Involved

- Let kids pick fruits and vegetables at the grocery store.
- Help them stir, wash, and plate food—they're more likely to eat it!



4: Be a Role Model

- Eat healthy foods yourself—kids learn by watching!
- Avoid negative comments like "I don't like broccoli either."



5: Offer Choices

- Provide a variety of healthy options and let kids choose what they want to eat.
- Use a "Tasting Chart" to celebrate trying new foods.



When to Seek Help?

If your child refuses entire food groups, has trouble chewing or swallowing, or loses weight, consult a family doctor.

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Crisp Colourful Fresh Summer Salad

JOSIE IANNAUDIO, RECE, ECAS, BASc, Humber Resource Consultation Services, Resource Consultant, Humber Polytechnic

Having a base of nutrient-dense greens and a vibrant assortment of colourful and crunchy vegetables is a great way to create a crisp colourful summer salad. Have fun shopping for fresh vegetables at your local grocery store or try growing your own vegetables in a garden. I am happy to share one of my personal favourite salads with you all. Enjoy!

Salad Ingredients

- ½ washed romaine lettuce
- ½ washed red leaf lettuce
- ½ washed green leaf lettuce
- ½ cup of thinly sliced cucumbers
- ½ cup of chopped tomato
- ½ cup of chopped peppers (colour of your choice)
- ½ cup of red chopped onion
- ½ cup of sliced almonds
- ½ cup of cranberries
- ½ cup of goat cheese (or any cheese of your choice)

Salad Dressing Ingredients

- 1/3 cup of olive oil
- 1/3 cup of white balsamic vinegar
- 1/3 cup of Dijon mustard

Directions

1. Purchase or pick all vegetables for this colourful salad!
2. Chop and slice each vegetable as stated above in ingredients.
3. In a large bowl add all vegetables together one by one.
4. Collect the salad dressing ingredients.
5. In a separate bowl, stir together olive oil, white balsamic vinegar and Dijon mustard.
6. Pour mixed salad dressing onto the salad.
7. Optional: Add salt, black pepper, or any other spices as desired.
8. Refrigerate for 10 minutes.

Nourish your soul with healthy food.

Professional Learning and Links

City Wide Training Calendar

(<https://www.citywidetraining.ca/>)

Connectability

(<https://www.connectability.ca/>)

About Kids Health

(<https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/>)

Zero to Three

(<https://www.zerotothree.org/>)

On Track Best Start

(https://www.beststart.org/OnTrack_English/)

Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care

(<https://www.childcareontario.org/>)

Infant and Early Mental Health Promotion

(<https://www.iemhp.ca/>)

How Does Learning Happen?

(<https://www.ontario.ca/page/how-does-learning-happen-ontarios-pedagogy-early-years/>)

The Mehrit Institute-Self Reg

(<https://self-reg.ca/>)



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WoodGreen Community Services

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“I have a concept of how change happens: through relationships and connection.”

— Jean Clinton