

## Inclusion and the Five Senses

All children bring gifts  
and have the right to be valued, accepted and included.  
We embrace inclusion and celebrate diversity as the means to foster the well being of  
every child and thereby enrich our communities.  
All are entitled to full participation and support to meet their individual needs  
Using a strength based, family centred approach  
whereby we all learn from each other.

The five senses are children's first tools for exploring the world around them, learning, growing and understanding. ECEs who have observed children or studied child development know that children spend about the first two years of their lives in Piaget's first stage of development, the sensory-motor stage. This is where much of children's primary learning and understanding of their place among their surroundings occurs. As children continue to grow developmentally, their senses guide them through our world. It is the primary job of an ECE to let children wonder, and to encourage children's natural curiosity and exploration of their surroundings by using all of their senses in a variety of ways. This helps promote children's holistic development; the Best Practices Licensing Manual states that children should be "encouraged to explore the indoor and outdoor environments and engage in activities to promote specific kinds of learning in all developmental domains: physical, social, emotional and cognitive".

So, how do we do this? We can begin by being curious ourselves, by modeling this type of behaviour for children. The development of curiosity and exploration is especially important for children with special needs; at the core, all children's needs are the same – they need to grow and become themselves. Inclusion is really about giving ALL children the tools that they need and can use to be successful in their world. The five senses are the first set of tools that children can use, and they act as the building blocks for learning and developing knowledge. The inclusion vision at the beginning of this article states that all children bring gifts...we can allow children to find their own gifts by using their senses and the environment in our centres as places to explore, create, learn and play. Also, let's allow children to develop in their own way and to be themselves. We can encourage children to use the skills that they have learned through sensory exploration to develop new skills based on their interests and needs. This is what an emergent, play-based curriculum is all about.

Our senses control how our bodies feel. A child's senses can be used to help her to relax and calm down or to become more alert. A child's senses can also help him feel more in control of his own body. Sensory input is especially helpful when a child is distracted, upset, ill, or feeling stressed. Since each child has individual preferences, it is difficult to predict how a child may react. For instance, we can compare visual reactions; observing a flashlight could alert a child, while watching fish in an aquarium may calm a child. We can also compare reactions to sound; listening to classical music could calm a child while rock music may have the opposite effect.

Understanding sensory issues can be the first step in finding solutions for difficult behaviours in children, since many behavioural issues actually have a sensory component. Try covering a child with a heavy blanket or quilt (deep pressure touch) to help calm a child who is about to lose control. Weighted vests are often used for this purpose.

It is also important for ECEs to create an environment that feeds children's wonder and sense of discovery, adventure and exploration. The Practices, Profiles and Principles scale from SpecialLink (P & P) tells us that it is important to be sure that universal design principles are evident throughout the centre, to allow for discovery by all children. Not only should the exploratory environment include opportunities to achieve specific goals for ALL children, it should also include equipment and materials that have been individualized to meet unique needs of the children. A centre may require curriculum modifications or it may be required to adapt its program in order to meet individual needs.

Staff members must be knowledgeable about children's therapies and participate collaboratively with therapists and parents in developing and assessing therapeutic interventions for all of the children. According to the Best Practices Licensing Manual, "individual plans for children with disabilities ensure appropriate curriculum goals are developed and activities are implemented to achieve the goals. Goals are included in the regular routines and activities of the centre". These goals can be posted at interests centres so that all staff members can be aware of them and work on them with the children.

The idea is truly to use all five of children's basic senses as a guide. The emergent curriculum philosophy dictates that ECEs observe children in order to discover their interests, and create learning experiences based on that information. So it all comes back to awareness and a basic curiosity about the children in our care and their world.

How can we further enhance the opportunities to allow ALL children to explore with their senses? What if a child does not have the use of one (or more) of her five senses? We can offer experiences on a small group basis, in order to include children with special needs into the daily program. For instance, if a child has a visual impairment, we can use toys and activities that cater to other senses; ones that require the use of smell or sound are ideal. For example, all children can enjoy using scented markers or play dough. If a child in your program is hearing impaired, an activity using different visuals or lights works well. A child with cerebral palsy or a physical disability could have fun with electronic games, which also improve fine motor skills and manual dexterity. The P & P scale suggests that an excellent inclusive program has a minimum of five examples of assistive technology. As an ECE, you must encourage children's development and learning, with each child's individual senses, interests and needs as your guide. Ultimately, you follow the children's lead and the children's senses to build wonder, exploration and learning.

Another note about the sensory experiences and the environment – ECEs need to build on children’s sensory skills both inside and outside. If outdoor play settings are not included in this exploration, children are losing out on discovering the wonders of nature. They are not as able to experience different types of weather, learn about the cycle of life, discover various insects, plants and animals that co-exist with people, to name just a few outdoor wonders. ECEs who are enthusiastic about the outdoors promote a positive attitude to children about the outside world that is invaluable to their health and development as they grow. In addition, taking activities outside adds a whole new dimension for children to discover.

Some suggestions to maximize every child’s potential to explore their surroundings using their senses include:

- Ensuring that all play areas are accessible to all children by using ramps, wide passageways and smooth surfaces wherever possible.
- Providing a wide range of play materials that can be easily manipulated by children of all ages and developmental capabilities.
- Creating areas for privacy, solitary play, social play and group interactions; this is especially important for children experiencing sensory overload.
- Ensuring that all staff members are aware of all children’s interests and needs and incorporate “teachable moments” into regular activities.
- Using a guiding strategy that allows all children to freely choose activities and experiment without compromising safety.

There are many other ways that your facility’s space and environment can be adapted to enable all children to fully use their capabilities and explore their surroundings with their senses, not to mention many activities that ECEs can implement to further encourage sensory discovery and experientially based learning (in other words, learning by doing; in “ECE language” learning through play). Each situation is really dependent on the children in the centre, their sensory needs and interests, and the environment and space available to the centre itself. What may be most important however, is the ECEs’ willingness to be curious and promote children’s curiosity, in order to support all of the children’s abilities to explore and learn, both inside and outside. Who knows what children will discover with willing and open-minded adults encouraging them to experiment with their senses!

References:

*Best Practices Licensing Manual for Early Learning and Child Care Centres*, revised 2005.

*The Inclusive Early Childhood Classroom* by Patti Gould and Joyce Sullivan, 1999.

*SpeciaLink Inclusive Practices Profile and Principles Scale* (2005 Final Workshop Version).

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