

Early Childhood Indicators of Progress

Using the ECIPs in Diverse Communities



Introduction

Minnesota's Early Indicators of Child Progress (ECIPs) are an important component in efforts to provide high quality early childhood education that supports the optimal development of each and every child regardless of income, ability, race, culture, language or special needs. They are designed to promote equity and excellence so that every child has access to teachers and providers who are knowledgeable about best practices. The practices support the individual needs of children while working toward generally accepted expectations for all. While the revised standards are grounded in current and commonly accepted research on brain development, child learning, content, curriculum and instruction, they are also based on the recognition that young children are individuals who are best understood and supported within the context of their family, culture and community.

As teachers and providers make use of the ECIPs in curriculum and assessment in their programs, it is important that they consider the implementation of the ECIPs through a cultural lens. They do so by recognizing the appropriateness of the developmental expectations in the standards for all children while also taking into consideration the social and cultural contexts in which the children in their program are being raised. They communicate with families in a reciprocal, two-way manner so that their knowledge of family values, beliefs, and child-rearing practices helps them to consider the way children are demonstrating their accomplishment of specific indicators of progress.

The best way for teachers and providers to learn more about cultural expectations for the children in their program, and to consider the ECIPs with respect to those expectations, is to partner with families. They need to communicate openly, ask questions, and increase their knowledge of similarities and differences in approaches. Early childhood professionals can also turn to the broader cultural community for further information and support. In this way, all are working together to generate positive outcomes for children.

The young children in early childhood programs in Minnesota come from diverse communities and cultures. They come from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, religious affiliations, and life experiences. Each child is learning, growing, and developing in a social and cultural context that includes a complex whole of language, knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, customs, and ways of living. As teachers and providers incorporate Minnesota's Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) in their programs, it is essential that they consider the standards through the lens of social, and cultural relevance.

The ECIPs are grounded in the knowledge that parents and family members are a child's first teachers. In high quality early childhood programs educators form strong partnerships with the families of the children (for more ideas see Brief #7 Using the Early Childhood Indicators of Progress in Parent and Family Education and Engagement). Valuing family culture and heritage is essential to effective family engagement. By integrating the unique cultures, languages and abilities of each child within the framework provided by the ECIPs, teachers and providers build on children's strengths and scaffold opportunities to support the development of each child towards his or her full potential.

Cultural Relevance in Early Childhood Programs

Cultural relevance in early childhood programs requires planning and intentionality on the part of early childhood professionals.

“Beyond enrollment and recognition of cultural diversity, early childhood programs embrace cultural competence when they provide culturally relevant and diverse opportunities for young children and their families. Doing so requires programming decisions and training and support for staff that allow for diversity to become infused in the daily life of the program.” (NAEYC 2012, 1)

Occasional cultural celebrations or explorations of holiday traditions are not sufficient to reflect the diversity that is seen in the families who enroll children in many early childhood programs. Reflecting on the social and cultural context influences the planning of the experiences that encourage children’s development of skills and abilities, so that the experiences make sense to the child. This reflection is also essential when considering how children may be demonstrating their skills and abilities.

In the accreditation criteria for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), there are 31 indicators (out of a total of 417) that define ways that programs can address cultural competence. These criteria address the following general categories:

- Partnering with families in welcoming and respectful ways.
- Being attentive to all aspects of culture, diversity, and potential bias in curricular approaches (including the environment, materials, activities, language and guidance techniques).
- Supporting children’s home language and communicating with families in their preferred language.
- Developing individualized, responsive, and culturally sensitive relationships between teachers and children.
- Conducting culturally appropriate assessment procedures.
- Engaging with the broader community’s cultural events and resources.
- Hiring and training with respect to diversity and cultural competence.

One important step to ensure that cultural relevance is part of the daily life of an early childhood program is for all staff to engage in self-reflection and cultural self-assessment. Administrators and directors, staff developers and trainers, and teachers and providers can consider their family backgrounds and life experiences and analyze how those effect their attitudes toward the care and education of young children and engagement with their families. In the Pathways to Cultural Competence Project Program Guide (NAEYC 2010), the following four principles can guide teachers and providers when reflecting on culturally competent practices:

1. Teacher Reflection
 - a. Reflect on how your individual values, beliefs, and practices regarding children’s learning are influenced by aspects of your own culture and linguistic experience.
 - b. Reflect on how the program where you work is influenced by culture and language.
2. Intentional Practice
 - a. Identify shared child-rearing goals with families; align your classroom decision-making and practices with these goals.
 - b. Plan ahead to address potential language or cultural barriers.
3. Strength-based Perspective
 - a. Acknowledge that you can learn from families.
 - b. Recognize that diversity enriches and provides depth to the overall learning experience.
 - c. Understand that different does not mean dysfunctional.
 - d. Respect and support the preservation of children and families’ home languages, cultural

backgrounds, and childrearing beliefs, goals, and practices.

e. Incorporate aspects of children's cultural and linguistic backgrounds in daily learning activities.

Demonstrate strengths that exist across cultures.

4. Open, Ongoing, Two-Way Communication between teachers and families
 - a. Ensure that families have opportunities to give you input. Families should not solely be recipients of information.
 - b. Plan ahead to address language barriers. (NAEYC 2010, 4)

As teachers and providers develop their awareness of cultural competence, they can implement day-to-day practices that support children's identity, family heritage, home language and cultural values. For more specific ideas and suggestions, teachers and providers can turn to books, articles, and on-line resources. Here are two for consideration:

- Anti-bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves by Louise Derman-Sparks and Julie Olsen-Edwards (available from NAEYC)
- The website Teaching for Change: Building Social Justice Starting in the Classroom has 104 free downloadable (PDF) articles on anti-bias early childhood education. These articles are presented in the categories of curriculum, identity development, language development, and parent/family resources. Nearly all of the articles are available in English and Spanish. <http://www.teachingforchange.org/anti-bias-education-articles>

Conclusion

The Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) were designed to be a useful tool to assist early educators in providing high quality services to young children and their families. Such services require attention to the cultural and social context of diverse communities. Early childhood professionals work toward developing cultural relevance throughout their program. They work closely with families and are self-reflective in considering their own backgrounds, life experiences, and attitudes.

References

The Division for Early Childhood (DEC). 2010. Position Statement: Responsiveness to ALL Children, Families, and Professionals: Integrating Cultural and Linguistic Diversity into Policy and Practice. Missoula, MT: Division for Early Childhood.

NAEYC Academy for Early Childhood Program Accreditation. 2012. Supporting Cultural Competence: Accreditation of Programs for Young Children Cross-Cutting Theme in Program Standards. Trend Briefs, August 2012, No. 4.

NAEYC. Pathways to Cultural Competence Project Program Guide. April, 2010. <http://www.buildinitiative.org/WhatsNew/ViewArticle/tabid/96/ArticleId/281/Pathways-to-Cultural-Competence.aspx>