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# Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Education



## Exemplary Practices 2012

Canada

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## Table of Contents

Welcome .....	4
About the Recipients .....	5
Christine Danyluk – Children are competent and capable. Believe in them, and they will believe in themselves! .....	5
Pat Frouws – A vision for innovation in early learning and care practice and environments... ..	6
Corine Gannon – Creating inspired learning environments .....	7
Elizabeth Jeffery– Creating a culture of belonging with a Parent Advisory Committee: “Do we have to?” .....	8
Danielle Denise Jimeno – The image of child – challenging universal ways of thinking... ..	9
Lisa Lamarre – Pedagogical leadership in early learning and community development.. ....	10
Lisa Gallagher – Children at the heart of it all .....	11
Jan Prowse – Teaching young children emotional regulation .....	12
Bernice Taylor – Bringing children back to earth! .....	13
Susan Woodward – Observing and responding with a caring heart . ....	14
Resources.. ....	15
Notes. ....	16

## Welcome

Most parents will agree that it is rare to find those special individuals who not only care for children, but are able to provide them with daily educational activities that get them ready for school, teach empathy and introduce them to their community.

For ten years, innovative and inspiring early childhood educators across the country have been honoured with the Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Education. The awards recognize the efforts of outstanding educators with a unique ability to create warm environments that children need to make the best possible start in life and where parents gain useful tools for years to come. Early childhood educators may receive one of two awards: the Certificate of Excellence and the Certificate of Achievement. Each recipient's **biography** highlights the innovative practices of some of Canada's most inspirational early childhood educators.

From all corners of Canada and from a variety of childcare settings, ten Certificate of Excellence recipients traveled to Ottawa in early October 2012 to receive their award from Prime Minister Stephen Harper and take part in a week of activities in honour of World Teachers' Day. It was a whirlwind tour that provided the diverse group with a true Ottawa experience. They visited the Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre, attended Question Period in the House of Commons and were granted an exclusive tour of the Library of Parliament with the Head Librarian.

At a reception hosted by the Honourable Andrew Scheer, Speaker of the House of Commons, the educators had the opportunity to meet and chat with Members of Parliament. Mrs. Laureen Harper also graciously hosted a reception for the group at 24 Sussex Drive. During their stay in Ottawa, the recipients also visited Rideau Hall where they met the Right Honourable David Johnston, Governor General of Canada and participated in a discussion with this fellow accomplished teacher and lifetime advocate for education.

The week culminated in a "Teacher's Talk" event hosted by Catherine Clark, from CPAC's *Beyond Politics*. Katherine Berg, Special Advisor to the Secretary-General for the Canadian Commission for UNESCO gave an address recognizing that nothing can replace a good teacher. And, former Canadian Astronaut Dr. Robert Thirsk gave a heartfelt presentation that praised the critical role teachers play in the choices students make and offered insight into the contribution of teachers to his own career.

The excitement in the room grew when the educators took over the stage in three themed panel discussions entitled "*Teaching empathy to young children*", "*It takes a community to raise a child*" and "*Early childhood education for the future*". They shared their philosophies, tricks of the trade and unique experiences in sessions that underlined their common passion for working with children and their parents.

It quickly became very clear that whatever the context, the key to success for these early childhood educators was their incredible ability to adapt to situations and to wear many different hats. From a green building designer to a puppeteer, or from a small home setting to a larger community centre, this was a quirky group of leaders who seemed to magically spin imagination into reality, as they teach young children the basics of empathy and link their classrooms to the community.

Please read about each educator's tried and tested best practices, philosophies of care and engaging activities and consult the resources they use in their classrooms.

The Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood education were launched in 2002 — for information about the program as well as partners and past recipients, go to [www.pma.gc.ca](http://www.pma.gc.ca).

## About the Recipients

### Christine Danyluk – Children are competent and capable. Believe in them, and they will believe in themselves!

*Canora Junior Elementary School, Canora, Saskatchewan*



Strong self-esteem is at the foundation for personal and educational success. How children feel about themselves can have a major influence on their desire and ability to learn.

At the Canora Junior Elementary School, we begin with the belief that children are competent and capable. We support their personal development with a variety of opportunities to build their independence. Over time, they assume increasing responsibilities, with young children pouring their own drinks, serving food, and cleaning up after themselves. They vacuum, rake leaves, and shovel snow. Growing independence helps them believe they can do anything.

We also engage our children with active listening. We don't simply listen to our children, but rather we ensure that their ideas are heard and acted upon. Their thoughts, ideas, and words are integral to the decisions about their learning and activities. They create pictures, sculptures, plays and structures in a self-directed, rather than adult-directed manner. They contribute ideas as to how their indoor and outdoor environments are arranged, and through this process, they understand that they have a voice, and an influence, over their world.

With growing independence and influence, the children begin to realize they have some power in their lives. We then work to help them understand that they have the ability to control how they view the world. We affirm that their feelings are not wrong, but we teach them that a positive attitude is a choice – a choice they can make. It is important to teach children about their personal power early on in their development. It increases self-confidence, and builds resilience.

With personal power comes personal responsibility, and the early years are a time when most children begin to realize that their words and actions can impact others. We use a variety of initiatives to teach our children how to be positive members of both our school and the wider community.

A particularly successful approach is centred on the book, *How Full Is Your Bucket for Kids*. This book discusses how our words and actions can fill or take from another person's bucket. We explain that everyone has an invisible emotional bucket and when it is full we are happy, but when it is empty we are sad. Another aspect of "bucketfilling" is that when you fill someone else's bucket, it also fills your own. This is a wonderful foundation for helping children understand the personal fulfillment that stems from being kind, and helping others. We also use quality literature to help children understand the concepts of "It Just Takes One" and "Pay it Forward", and we give them opportunities to practice these concepts in service to others.

We support this emotional development with an equally calming physical environment. Our prekindergarten centre is a beautiful, calming location with seasonal colors and elements of nature woven throughout. The environment is safe and welcoming, reflecting the spirit of both the children and their families.

Ultimately, a child's self-image is one of the many building blocks in their success and satisfaction in school, and throughout life. With the right words and environment, we can build our children up, or knock them down. In the end, our voice becomes their inner voice. We must ensure that voice is strong, supportive and proud.

It is up to us to give children the tools to become confident, life-long learners and caring, contributing members of our society. When we show children we believe in them they will believe in themselves and our world will be a better place.

## Pat Frouws – A vision for innovation in early learning and care practice and environments

SFU Childcare Society, Burnaby, British Columbia



“Education is constructed together by children and adults in a rich daily life.” – Wonder of Learning Exhibit from the schools of Reggio Emilia, Italy.

For a rich daily life full of surprise, wonder and discovery, I have come to recognize our environment, or physical space, is an important factor in learning success. I kept this in mind when designing our new early learning and care facility. It took five years from the concept to the opening, but vision and passion kept me focused; the new centre was a place where many dreams would come together – it was a place where we could raise citizens of the future who can expect sustainability as a natural state.

Thinking back, I have been able to identify several key elements that were critical for stakeholder buy-in:

### Vision

It is absolutely vital to have a clear and unswerving vision for your work with children. My vision was to design an early learning and care facility that would provide children with the freedom to explore the world around them in a respectful, collaborative and reflective community.

### Appealing to partner's goals

I researched and appealed to our funder's goals and priorities and found them to align with mine. The funders, SFU Community Trust, were motivated to market the best early learning and care facility to their residential community. Working together we created an early learning and care facility that met both of our goals for innovation in practice, and the construction of an environmentally sustainable “living building”.

### Finding like-minded partners

The architect responded to the directive to provide a Reggio-inspired facility. Nearly the entire design team members had children of their own. These partners sought to be part of something amazing, which made it easier to promote additional quality space for this facility.

### Collaborate together along the way

From the start, we worked together, with all stakeholders providing input and feedback throughout the process. We even asked the children what their dreams would be for an outdoor play space.

### Keep regulators informed and invite them to participate

We engaged our licensing officer and city planners early in the design stage. They were invited and participated in the development of the plans.

The project eventually blossomed into the UniverCity Childcare Centre; a living building for living people. Since we generate as much energy as we use and collect or recycle more water than we consume, sustainable living is taught and lived. This state-of-the-art facility was built using non-toxic materials, sourced as locally as possible and allows us to fully embrace a Reggio-inspired curriculum. It has placed us as a leader in the field of sustainable communities.

## Corine Gannon – Creating inspired learning environments

Genesis Early Learning Centre, Edmonton, Alberta



The environment is key in the learning process. When classrooms are cozy and designed to nurture curiosity, “change as the only constant” feels natural and safe.

The Genesis Early Learning Centre is a professional development site, with a multi-disciplinary early learning team, and teacher resource centre. Our centre is home to early learning consultants, speech language pathologists, family school liaison workers, behaviour specialists, occupational therapists, adapted physical education specialists, physical therapists, early learning facilitators, certified teachers, assistants and an administrative team that provides inclusive support to all our early learning programs – including staff, children and families.

The Centre is home to the 100 Voices Program. Inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach to education, 100 Voices is committed to the creation of a learning environment that enhances and facilitates a child’s way of thinking through the combination of all the expressive, communicative and cognitive languages. The program is built on several key elements including: a nurturing environment, inquiry based and child-led learning, family programming, and the use of fine arts/creativity for personal expression.

After five years in existence, over 1200 children have registered in this year’s program. Using an all-inclusive approach, the program employs a team of teachers, social workers, speech language pathologists, occupational therapists and behaviour specialists. These teams have become specialists in creating *Playscapes*. With the *Playscape* approach a class can choose to play in a movement, dance, art or musical studio, and learn together with our fine art specialists, adapted physical education and dance specialists.

An important goal of the multi-disciplinary team is to work with the classroom teacher throughout the day, to integrate new learning strategies into the natural context of the child’s environment. By moving the therapists into the classrooms (rather than pulling the child out), the children learn and develop skills that carry over into their natural contexts more successfully.

To support staff in meeting the diverse needs of children, our multi-disciplinary team has created a book entitled: *Universal Designs for Learning in the Early Learning Context*. This book includes both visuals and strategies that can be used by teachers and other team members in an early learning environment. We have also created several video segments for our 100 Voices program that are posted on our district website at [www.ecsd.net](http://www.ecsd.net) (Early Learning) and the [Alberta Regional Consortium website](#).

In an effort to extend the learning environment beyond our schools, the 100 Voices program has created both outreach and mobile approaches. With our outreach efforts, we partner with existing children’s programs, such as the YMCA. For our mobile approach, we have created an EMU – an Early Learning Mobile Unit – where programs travel to families and provide activities for both the parent and child together so that we can continue to build capacity within the child’s home environment.

It truly takes a village – and the early years are critical – to ensure that we are all striving to develop each child to their greatest potential, growing their passions, using strong creative skill sets, to succeed in the world beyond the classroom.



## Elizabeth Jeffery – Creating a culture of belonging with a Parent Advisory Committee: “Do we have to?”

*Little Wonders Child Care Centre, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island*



I’ll confess that those were the first words out of my mouth when I found out we were required by our provincial government to create a Parent Advisory Committee. I remember thinking: “Nobody will want to be involved,” or worse, “What if they want to be *too* involved”?

Our Parent Advisory Committee is not the typical childcare centre board or committee with a secretary, a treasurer, and fundraising as the *raison d’être*. The goal of our committee is to nurture the relationships among our families, our educators and our community. Our committee includes program families, interested community members, and educators. We strive to create joy within our program and to build a culture of belonging. To this end, all of our members have witnessed the lasting benefits of this effort, and we have moved from a

culture of drop-and-go, to one centred on building and nurturing family and community relationships.

Our very first project brought about the most significant change for our program. We started opening the centre one Saturday morning every other month, for children and families to come together. There is no structure, but simply open-ended activities, books and play spaces available. It’s a time for all of the caregivers in the child’s life to come together: mom, dad, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins and siblings. The pride the children express in the centre, and their place in it, when they show their family around is palpable. Building on ideas generated during this family time, we now include a clothing swap for families. Everyone can leave with bags of clothing for the coming season at no cost.

These large projects are rewarding, but the most satisfying result of our efforts is in the day-to-day engagement that has become the foundation of our centre’s culture. We have seen parents arrive in ambulances; bring in ski survival equipment, blueprints, and even a huge box of medical supplies for the children to explore! On the other side of this collaboration are the educators, who give up precious family time on our Saturdays, and have, on more than one occasion, offered a personal evening of care to help a family survive those life events that take their breath away.

Our program has always valued parents as partners, but with the creation of our Parent Advisory Committee we have created deeper, longer lasting relationships with families. This past winter we had a parent join us for a Saturday morning family time, even though her daughter had chosen to go skating with her cousins. We have families that have been gone for years that still drop by for a visit or provide donations of everything from scrap paper to bubble wrap.

This has been a joyful journey.

We have received so many notes from parents expressing their appreciation for taking the time to make them feel so welcome, for our understanding, for that extra smile or a much-needed hug. I no longer think it possible for people to become *too* involved, and cherish the culture we have created, together, for our children.



## Danielle Denise Jimeno – The image of child – challenging universal ways of thinking

*A Place to Grow Childcare Centre, Surrey, British Columbia*



In 2007, I began a journey with the **Investigating Quality Project** (IQ Project) at the University of Victoria. It has been an investigative journey that goes beyond the common Euro-Western discourses and allows me to examine the language I use for children, and the images that come to mind when thinking about children. It is a journey that has changed the way I think and the way I work.

I discovered that my child-centred and developmentally-appropriate practices limited my perspectives and perhaps excluded other ways of thinking. I realized that the early childhood environments I have contributed to, that I believed to foster choice and freedoms for children, are more often than not, the offerings of adult decisions, full of bias and discourse. Activities, materials, and environments created by adults, serving the adults perspective of what we believe to be

the best ways to develop a child. Challenging my traditional ways of thinking is to recognize “that the image of child is not universal, but varies in response to people’s experiences, beliefs and aspirations, and according to who participates in the dialogue about childhood” (British Columbia Early Learning Framework, 2008). This realization has led me along a reflective path, expanding my image of child and recognizing that the child is a significant contributor to knowledge, who is not separate from the contexts of family, community, and the world at large.

The greatest benefit from being involved with the IQ Project was the opportunity to participate in dynamic discussions that explored my image of the child. It encouraged me to view things from multiple lenses. When we are planning environments for children from multiple perspectives that consider social justice, culture, tradition and the infinite wisdom that comes from the generations and communities we live within, it only stands to benefit children. It takes courage to challenge our approaches.

### How can this pedagogy work for you?

When considering the best interests of the children I work with, I reflect on the desires or dreams of the whole family, and ask myself: “How can we invite our children and families to participate in decisions about programming and care?” I also wonder if early childhood care can be a means of connection and capacity building within our communities, by connecting and engaging in conversations about our images of children and families.

I would encourage other educators not to separate their image of child from that of family, community and society as a whole and to challenge known *truths*, “realizing that any description of human beings (children) limits the possibilities that we as educators provide for them.” (Cannella, 1998, p.173) I would invite educators to accept this uncertainty as an invitation to ongoing reflective practices, where we do not view ourselves as the expert, but rather as partners with children and families.

## Lisa Lamarre – Pedagogical leadership in early learning and community development

*Algonquin College Early Learning Centre, Ottawa, Ontario*



Think outside the box. Each and every day, early years professionals are in a unique position to use our acquired knowledge and skills to provide leadership to our community. Committed to lifelong learning and a desire to inspire early childhood educators, Algonquin College Early Learning Centre in Ottawa, Ontario seeks to share, demonstrate and promote best practices in early childhood education.

As a demonstration lab, our reach extends beyond our post-secondary students. We strive to support our employees, and the community, in our quest for high quality early learning and care.

To succeed in early childhood education (ECE), we believe that ECE directors and supervisors must make pedagogical leadership their first priority. Here at Algonquin College Early Learning Centre, we have done just that. At our school, registered early childhood educators provide an innovative educational experience through play-based pedagogy. Our commitment extends beyond the children, to encompass families, post-secondary students and the community.

Our program is founded on the **Early Learning for Every Child Today (ELECT) - A Framework for Early childhood Programmes (2007)**. Through play-based, child-centred learning, the educators observe, plan, document and assess children's learning at all times. Family workshops, children's observation logs, documentation, apps for mobile learning, and ongoing communication meet the Guiding Principles and Continuum of Development that is outlined in the ELECT document.

Moving beyond the classroom, we offer professional development workshops to the community that are designed to deepen knowledge of ELECT as a guide to support curriculum. The goal is to encourage early childhood professionals to lead in ways that improve learning for children and that positively impact a child's early experiences. We also provide support to families, offering workshops around areas of parenting, child development, and time these at the end of the day to accommodate parent schedules.

Leadership is instrumental in providing time, guidance, and policy that promotes the development of all children in a way that is consistent and accountable. Pedagogical leadership in early learning is a decision to put early learning at the forefront and ensure that the commitment to lifelong learning begins now!

## Lisa Gallagher – Children at the heart of it all

*McGill Childcare Centre, Montreal, Québec*



When you walk into the McGill Childcare Centre, the first thing you see is a community quilt hanging in the main entrance depicting what our families value most. At the centre of the quilt is the quote, “children, at the heart of it all.” This is a project that was created by the educators, in collaboration with parents and represents the essence of who we are: the centre as an extension of the family.

The McGill Childcare Centre opened in October 1973 and will celebrate its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary next fall. The key to our success has been keeping the focus on the children, and ensuring that the childcare centre has a place in the larger community.

While there have been some struggles over the years (due to the age and location of the facility, and management turnover), we have maintained a single minded focus on the children in our care. When the best interests of the children are kept in focus, everything else falls into place.

During a board retreat in 2008, the members dreamed that one measure of success would be media headlines highlighting the work of the centre. In the years since this dream, we began to update our official vision, mission and values. This exercise brought the community together, from all stakeholders within the organization and outward to the McGill community and the community at large.

Since that time, we have recognized, celebrated and embraced the strengths of individuals and our community has flourished. An official policy on the importance of including children with special needs was developed and implemented; an annual community BBQ was introduced and continues to grow every year; parent participation and the vital partnership between home and the centre have been strengthened.

As a centre within the larger McGill community, the various departments have welcomed and valued our group. The traditional skating program is offered at the university arena, a swimming program in the school’s fitness centre, story time in the Education library and visits to the campus museums are always thrilling. The children were recently invited to attend the inauguration of a campus garden. They brought watering cans, were introduced to the various plants and enjoyed snack on the outdoor terrace provided by the Graduate Student Society. Student presence in the childcare centre has expanded beyond the faculty of education to include students from a vast array of disciplines including psychology, language and communication, music, medicine and more.

As once dreamed by a parent board member not so long ago, the centre has been the focus of articles in the campus newspaper, the Montreal Gazette and even an international publication, Information Exchange... with the children at the heart of it all.

## Jan Prowse – Teaching young children emotional regulation

*Stepping Stones Childcare Centre, Port Hardy, British Columbia*



I have collection of five puppets who play with my students: Grandma and Grandpa Noodle and their three grandchildren Johnny, Julie and Jeanie. I use these puppets to create different scenarios that help the children name their feelings and emotions, and we discuss how to solve the various situations that arise between the grandparents and their grandchildren.

Emotional control is a fundamental to both life, and learning. Humans are inherently social and our success is tied to our ability to navigate our interpersonal relationships.

To assist children in understanding and regulating their emotions, we must first help them understand their own emotions and how to regulate their feelings and reactions. They must learn what makes them happy, what makes them sad, what they can or should do when someone hurts them, or what to do when they get angry. To help children grasp the concept and array of emotions, I use puppets, pictures and scripts through programs like Second Step and Tucker Turtle. Another useful resource is the [Centre on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning](#) (CSEFEL).

The CSEFEL is an excellent resource for teachers and parents alike. All materials are available for download, and the site supplies many additional resources such as the Teaching Pyramid (a model for supporting social competence and preventing challenging behaviours in young children), Tucker Turtle, Problem-Solving Steps, Solution Kit, Feeling Faces Cube, Emotion Faces... and the list goes on. It offers everything a parent or teacher needs for educating young children – from babies to older children – about emotions, feelings, and appropriate ways to manage them.

Through Second Step, resources from the CSEFEL and my puppets, I like to find ways to make learning fun. When interacting with the puppets, the children practice an array of strategies and learn to deal with anger, impulse control and develop empathy for others. This in turn helps them regulate their emotions. Successful emotional regulation leads to calmer children and a better learning environment – which is what we all want for the children in our care.

## Bernice Taylor – Bringing children back to earth!

*Drayton Valley Early Childhood Development Centre, Drayton Valley, Alberta*



Growing up in Southwestern Ontario I spent many summer days observing farmers in fields, parents in gardens, and the Amish going about their day-to-day lives. From this I learned that a community should work in harmony with the land, giving back, as much as it receives. Much of this experience came full circle, when in 2008 I was invited to design a new learning environment for the opening of the early childhood development centre in Drayton Valley.

From the beginning I envisioned a space that created inspiration both outdoors and in. To this end, we created an Eco Park to inspire and engage the children in our program, and the community at large. The park boasts a River of Sand to engage children in learning about the North Saskatchewan River, a hill named Buck Mountain, a large structure to model the local oil industry, and numerous

flower beds, and garden planters. Our efforts bloomed with the help of local seniors, community members, parents and the entire community is now involved in Eco Park. What began as a place for children has become a focal point for the all of those that enjoy and respect the outdoors.

Children of all ages plant, weed and harvest their own vegetables. They manage our vermicomposter and the compost it creates while learning about the process itself. Seniors join us to paint birdhouses and share their expertise. Local high school students and young offenders with community service time have contributed to the construction of a garden shed and planters. The learning environment has been transformed; as our staff, parents, students and community learn together as their excitement grows with each new project.

We hope to grow and build on our vision of sustainable communities, with a new community garden plot that was recently planted at our Town Civic Centre. The children with the Out of School Care program were able to monitor its progress, and harvest items like stevia, all while learning about good and bad sugars for our bodies. Seeing them taste a green leaf and finding it sweeter than any candy was an unforgettable moment for all of us. As an added bonus, the children are now learning about giving and sharing, as they distribute excess garden produce to the community!

I feel privileged to be able to share my childhood memories and values in our centre. Bringing children back to earth creates a love of nature, a love for the outdoors and gives us hope for a future where all stakeholders hold the environment close to heart.

## Susan Woodward – Observing and responding with a caring heart

*Childgarden Preschool, Coquitlam, British Columbia*



Watching a couple of children pretending to be astronauts one day inspired us to transform the classroom into a space ship using old keyboards and bubble wrap. The children became very creative – they made space suits, helmets and even walkie-talkies. The space project concluded with a trip to the space centre, families brought in newspaper articles about space and we had over six months of curriculum.

Careful observation is the first and most important step in building a responsive, child centred curriculum. Deeply inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, I strive to truly understand the children in my care, to develop relationships, teach empathy and caring, and to create a program that meets the needs of each unique individual, while bringing us together as a community.

While I use this approach in my preschool, the process itself begins at home. For each new child entering the preschool, our teaching team conducts home visits before classes begin. By the end of the visit, they have embarked on a path for open communication with the family, and have shared some special moments with the child. These moments built trust and during the first days of preschool we drew on that memory, and used it as a starting point to create a relationship based on trust and mutual respect.

Within the classroom, we use play to connect with our children. As I observe their body language, words and actions, they begin to feel important, listened to, and understood. I use information talk and open-ended questions to delve deeper. Often, overnight I'll think about something a child said, and come back to them the next day and tell them, "I was thinking about what you said and it made me wonder..." Having their thoughts and words taken so seriously, boosts their self-image tremendously. Suddenly this child now has the confidence to share other ideas. By engaging in conversations with children and modeling respectful, reciprocal listening, our students feel valued and important. This gives them the confidence to question, or to share their thoughts and misconceptions, which then become our tools for building a responsive curriculum.

This type of observing is more than making notes on toy use or group behaviour. True, intimate observation takes time, slowing down and not rushing to meet an agenda. Ongoing observation is a work in progress that takes on meaning when we take the time to reflect. To reflect effectively, we must be honest about our own perspectives, and any preconceived opinions we may have brought to the classroom.

I try to refrain from interfering while I observe. This takes practice, as we have the experience and knowledge to guide us to a solution, but giving children the opportunity to solve problems organically and make mistakes before success is crucial. Through trial and error, we gain invaluable insight and amazing discoveries unfold... not just for the children, but for ourselves as well.

Try not to concern yourself with outcomes. Be present for the process and the journey of discovery. The possibilities and rewards are worth it!

## Resources

[Centre on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning \(CSEFEL\) learning modules \(Second Step and Tucker Turtle\)](#)

[Investigating Quality \(IQ\) Project \(University of Victoria\)](#)

[Moe the Mouse](#)

[Reggio Emilia Approach Educational Philosophy](#)

[Safe Spaces Bully Prevention Program](#)

[Seeds of Empathy](#)

[StopaBully.ca](#)

[Waldorf Education](#)



## Notes

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

