

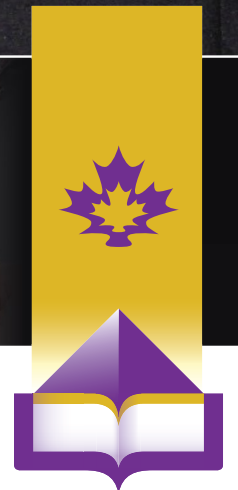


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2015 Exemplary Practices



Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Education

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Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Education

2015 Exemplary Practices

Welcome. Put fifteen educators in a room and they will find plenty to talk about. That was certainly true of the 2015 national recipients of the [Prime Minister's Awards for Teaching Excellence](#) and [Excellence in Early Childhood Education](#). Despite the differences among them—they hailed from communities small and large from across the country, and worked with children and young people from toddlers to teenagers on a wide variety of subject matters and in a range of educational settings—the educators had much in common in their approach to preparing children for life in the 21st century.

During the Teacher's Talk session, held when the recipients were in Ottawa in May 2016 to receive their awards, each educator spoke about some of his or her innovative and successful teaching practices.

The assembled group heard about how both kindergarteners and senior high school students use technology to enhance their learning, and how educators seek to give their charges the lead to pursue their interests while still covering the curriculum.

Many presentations reminded listeners of some of the fundamentals that underlie education no matter what the age or circumstances of the students: developing curiosity and imagination, getting exercise and a chance to explore the natural world, and ensuring families remain an important part of children's education.

But the most common theme the fifteen recipients' short presentations brought to light was the challenges and benefits of providing authentic learning experiences. The nods around the table were numerous as various educators talked about how their students interact with the community, with experts and with peers to solve real-world problems, develop relationships and expand their knowledge.

Exemplary Practices gives a glimpse into some of these award-winning educators' approaches and techniques. Individual articles focus on a slice of the work these professionals do in their respective classrooms and early childhood education centres. These are complemented by a list of resources for other educators to tap into, and [biographies](#) that provide background on the recipients' philosophy and more of their best practices and achievements.

The Prime Minister's Awards for Teaching Excellence honour well-rounded educators who provide exemplary educational experiences to students in Kindergarten to Grade 12 across Canada. The Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Education recognize the crucial work being done in the many and varied child care settings in the country to ensure the sound development of young children, and to start them on a journey of life-long learning.

The Prime Minister's Awards for Teaching Excellence are administered by Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada on behalf of the Prime Minister and with gracious support from the [RBC Foundation](#), [OpenText](#) and [Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada](#). The Prime Minister's Awards for Excellence in Early Childhood Education is supported by [Employment and Social Development Canada](#), [Public Health Agency of Canada](#) and [Health Canada](#). For information about the programs, and its partners and recipients, please [contact the program office](#).

Inclusion, innovation and inquiry in the 21st century classroom

Early childhood education is about more than academics. It's also about experiences. As an educator, I'm constantly challenged to recognize and value the role of each child's experiences in the learning process and to support it with meaningful activities. Educators also have the 21st century challenge of integrating technology, all while assuring successful curriculum outcomes.

In the midst of this, we can sometimes overlook the importance of getting to know a child as an individual—their interests, their strengths, their needs. This is why I believe it's crucial to spend time listening to children. Sitting with them at the snack table, interacting with their families, and listening to them as they play are just a few examples of how I implement this practice into my daily teaching approach. Only as we better understand



Laurie Higgins
Carruthers Creek Public School
Ajax, Ontario

Type of Setting:

Full-day kindergarten for children ages 4 and 5 years

each child is successful inclusion in the classroom possible. Thereby, each child can feel confident and willing to fit in with others while still being able to use their own voice.

When I have developed a relationship of trust with and a sense of belonging in each child, I begin to dig deeper through inquiry and investigation—surveying interests, activating minds and fostering learning.

Children have an astounding capacity for creativity and are willing to learn through experimentation, without seeing mistakes as failures. I make this possible by providing inviting, meaningful, authentic materials for the children to explore, to question and otherwise connect with. I ensure the children feel safe while they ask questions and make predictions, regardless of their background, knowledge or life experiences. It's important to allow them to take chances as they learn. Children need to make mistakes and find out the answers on their own. Helping them learn in this way and expand on what they already know is an important practice for the modern early childhood educator. In turn, this will help children develop sound adult self-learning practices.

My teaching practices are constantly evolving due to my growing experience, increasing resources, better technology, reflective practice, and mostly because I can clearly see how each successive classroom of children is different from the ones that came before. I must adapt my approach to meet evolving demands and the specific individual needs of every child in my classroom.

"It is important for children to be connected to the curriculum, and to see themselves in what is taught, how it is taught, and how it applies to the world at large." – The Kindergarten program, 2016

The benefits of walking in nature for the developing child

Many children in today's world need, more than anything, an adult who is truly present and who honours their age and stage of development, and provides activities carried out in a relaxed way. Walking, especially in green spaces, provides natural "be here now" opportunities.

My colleagues and I take the children at our centre out for a nature walk every day, and the benefits are endless.

They begin with getting dressed to go out. My colleagues and I provide help when needed, but allow children to figure out these complex body movements for themselves. This, in turn, supports the development of coordination, dexterity, awareness of limbs, sense of self-movement and balance, and supports the body-brain-mind relationship.

The group often takes long, meandering walks; other times shorter walks are the right thing. The children do not carry anything, so they are uninhibited in their movement. Forests shelter everyone from the wind, rain, snow or intense sun. The children have



plenty of chances to stop and play—near a creek, on the beach or in clearings in the woods. For those living in a city, take advantage of the many green spaces or parks there. A colleague in Denmark takes her class to a cemetery every day.

The children can run ahead, but they must be able to hear me (I sing as we walk) and must stop if they come to a fork in the path. I then take three sticks and make an arrow to point us in the right direction for our way back. Of course, I always know where we are going, but it's good for children to learn tricks for not getting lost in the forest.

Nature provides simple, ever-changing beauty, obstacles to climb over, under or around as the group explores. The natural ground is uneven, which helps with balance, an important aspect of children's being able to sit still.

As we go along, the adults can observe how individual children move and carry themselves, where their interests are, how they respond to what crosses their

path, and the social interactions or lack thereof with the group.

Integrating a walk into the daily routine just takes a bit of planning:

- Pack and carry a simply first aid kit, snacks or lunch, and water.
- For long excursions (more than four hours), leave a drop bag somewhere so you can swap out the lunch basket for a supply of snacks and fresh water. Sometimes, I park my car part way along the route with these supplies.
- Know your route, including the good places to stop for nutrition, and for play and rest. Decide ahead of time whether you're going on a short jaunt or a longer adventure. Sometimes I have the parents pick up their children at the end of the walking route.

Walks are joyful, engaging and restorative. They help children in so many ways that if I were writing a school curriculum, I would require a daily hour-long or longer walk in every grade to nurture thinking, feeling and integrating, and promote development of the body, soul and spirit.



Kim Hunter

A Child's Garden

Salt Spring Island, British Columbia

Type of setting:

Family child care centre for children ages

3 to 6 years

To nurture the whole child, include the family

The families I have the privilege of working alongside have a different view of extended family than I did when I was growing up. "Extended family" for the members of the Sumas First Nation is not the far-off cousins you never see. Everyone is closer, more involved in each other's lives, and use "auntie" and "uncle" more freely for various relatives. Many people consider their cousins as siblings.

This is a wonderful family model. And, I found that once I could accept families outside my idea of what they should be or what they should or should not be doing, I could connect with them much easier.

This has made it possible to apply a family-centred approach to a wide variety of the programs at the centre. The priority is always to help the children and their families feel safe and comfortable. An open-door policy is a great way to achieve this. Many parents wish to linger at morning drop-off time. The door is always open to parents, who would like to see how their child is doing or to help with their child's transition to preschool. When there is a parent who needs some adult time and wants to stay for a cup of coffee, or someone is



having a difficult time with one of their children and wants to talk, my colleagues and I love for them to stay for the time they need.

It's a big thrill when family members show an interest in being involved in any of the centre's programs. Parents have come to bake with the children, and make smoothies and chocolates with them. Elders have baked bannock, helped plant the garden and shared circle time.

The centre loves to celebrate families. We do this by holding special days for mothers, fathers and elders. We also encourage family participation on field trips and at our Christmas and graduation luncheons. This past year, at our elders' tea, we had 23 grandparents and great-grandparents attend with nine children. It was a great honour for us to have them all there.

Gaining the trust of some families can be challenging. In those circumstances, I make myself available in a number of ways: babysitting, taking kids camping, providing respite care, bringing a parent to appointments or finding services for them. In every instance, the common denominator is the child. Showing families I am there for them makes it easier for me to attain their trust.

Within the community, there are many people whom I consider my family. This means I do my best to offer them the love and support they need, the way a family member should. None of the things I do as "family" are part of my job description, and I don't do them because I feel obligated to do so. I help the members of this wonderful community because they are my family. I love them and I want to help—to cultivate strong connections and even stronger children.



Sophie Loewen

Busy Bear Preschool Club and Head Start
Abbotsford, British Columbia

Type of Setting:

Aboriginal Head Start for children ages 3 to 5 years

Giving up the lead: How technology is redefining early learning environments

Imagine seeing several students gathered around a ladder discussing the ways in which force and friction are inhibiting motion in their construction designs. Over in the corner, there are three students using FaceTime on their teacher's phone to ask a local expert questions about the garter snake they found in the playground. Finally, one student is busy in the library searching for information about birdhouses using QR codes.

Now, imagine these students are only five.

Technology is shifting the early learning landscape and re-defining my pedagogy and the learning taking place in my classroom. In my classroom, technology, the outdoors and the community are all effective tools in student-directed, process-based, inquiry-driven learning.

Recognizing that families lead busy lives, technology—from e-portfolios and blogs to Skype, FaceTime and texts—has opened the doors of the classroom, allowing family members to stay in touch and become active participants. E-portfolios enable students to independently document, share and reflect daily learning. Parents are able to view and comment on the experiences taking place in their child's school life, all but replacing traditional and static report cards.



I am an unyielding advocate for the power and potential of “little people,” and am guided by a belief in their inherent capabilities. I have shifted away from traditional “theme-based” teaching (adult-led), and started to design overarching year plans around key concepts and ideas (student driven inquiry). This change has enabled students to become directors of their own learning by delving into their own ideas and wonders. This change came unexpectedly. When I started to blog about the learning taking place in class, I found families would discuss the events taking place in our room at night, and then students would return the next day with new wonders. I slowly began to let go of ‘my plan’ and follow their questions. As fulfilling as this approach is, it isn't always easy. Responsive teaching requires you to always be watching and listening for opportunities to further learning. It involves letting go of control inherent in the traditional model of school.

Shifting away from the “what” of teaching, I spend a great deal of time reflecting on the “how” of teaching. More specifically, how and where do young children learn and what am I doing to support the ways in which they are composing their lives? It has been through answering these questions that I have found ways to engage the natural curiosities of children and empower them on their own unique learning journeys.



Lindsay Stuart

Henry Braun School

Regina, Saskatchewan

Type of Setting:

Kindergarten for children ages 4 to 6 years

I have also opened the classroom to the community by setting up “expert panels.” Students can contact dozens of community leaders and industry professionals in real time using their iPads. When the experts are able to take the call, they engage with the students and help them with their inquiries.

I thoroughly vet any applications used in the classroom, ensure they are only used appropriately and are never a substitute for learning or engagement. It is not about simply using technology but rather providing opportunities, spaces and relationships for children to compose their learning and lives in unique, safe and developmentally appropriate ways. The biggest thing I can share with others is to take your time. When I first started using technology in the classroom, I started small and worked with a few students and families that I knew would give me constructive feedback. When I felt ready, only then did I expand. The biggest mistake I've witnessed is trying to take on too many things at once, getting frustrated, and in turn, frustrating students and families.

Imagination builds community

StrongStart is a program for families to drop in and play together. The youngest child I've met was four days old and the oldest was 6. My role is to empower parents to believe they are their child's first and most important teacher. I do that by creating a program that encourages both child and parent to explore, create and play together.

Imagination, curiosity and wonder are the foundation of learning. When educators encourage curiosity, children begin to ask questions, allowing them to dig further into an interest. Their learning is only limited by their imaginations.

One project that has lasted almost five years was sparked by the children's interests in fairies. They didn't ask whether they were real but rather wondered where to find them, what their houses looked like, what they ate, if they liked colours and glitter, and whether they would play and hide.

This interest led to a space in a community nature park called "[Fairy Lane](#)." The children painted wooden doors to hide in the trees. Every month for the first year, the children, parents and I visited Fairy Lane to draw pictures of fairies, to leave pumpkins to decay (and to be checked on subsequent visits) or to clean up and sort the treasures the children found. All of this allowed me, as the facilitator, to introduce art, math, science, physical activity, literacy and the love of being in the forest.



Maureen Wagner
 Brooklyn Elementary School StrongStart
 Comox, British Columbia

Type of setting:

School-based StrongStart centre for children
 ages 0 to 5 years



I encourage other educators to consider launching their personalized version of Fairy Lane. Of course, there have been many lessons learned along the way, and I would have the following recommendations for anyone considering emulating my approach:

- Do some planning and be well prepared, but remain adaptable and flexible (be ready to turn a challenge into an opportunity at a moment's notice).
- Have a goal that you would like to achieve with your children (my goal was to use Fairy Lane as a way to regularly get my families to explore and engage with nature).
- Engage the parents and encourage them to play along (this enhances the child's experience in imaginative play).

By building on the children's interest in fairies, a community of families exploring this forest and many others has grown up. Encouraging imagination, curiosity and wonder in children can take them to places never dreamt of and introduce them to new ideas.

It led the program to several joint projects in community. One was a collaborative art exhibition with two other early years centres at a local art gallery. Grade 7 students worked with their little buddies in my program to write stories and build Wee Folk doors out of clay that have been placed in the forest for all to enjoy. Teachers in other schools have visited Fairy Lane and took the idea back to their school to create something similar.

In short, if you actively listen, test out ideas and observe the children, the process of developing activities from children's interests can be easy. The program is for them, and so the ideas should be from them. All of this began and continues from the children's imaginations and curiosity. Scientist Carl Sagan sums it up with this quote "Imagination will often carry us to worlds that never were. But without it we go nowhere."

Resources*

Online Tools & Resources

- [Aurasma](#)
- [100 Languages of Children](#)
- [Authentic Learning](#)
- [Evernote](#)
- [GarageBand](#)
- [Google Docs](#)
- [iMovie](#)
- [TodaysMeet](#)

Organizations & Communities

- [Cyber Patriot](#)
- [Bright Lights in the Lab](#)
- [Fairy Lane](#)
- [Information and Communications Technology Council](#)
- [Sisler High School Network and Cyber Security Academy](#)
- [The Firefly Foundation](#)
- [World Economic Forum's Top 10 skills for 2020](#)

Multimedia

- [Our Village Uganda \(YouTube video\)](#)
- [Time to Play \(film\)](#)

**For both 2015 Prime Minister's Awards for Teaching Excellence and Excellence in Early Childhood Education*