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Learning and Joy in the Pandemic: Manitoba Kindergarten Practice Resource

Manitoba's Kindergartens offer our youngest students (who are only four and five years old) a joyful introduction to school. Kindergarten gives these students the opportunity for intentional, play-based, developmentally appropriate learning experiences that enable them to become capable, motivated, confident learners. It fosters their health across all developmental domains—even during pandemic times.

How do we mediate COVID-19 through the lens of developmentally appropriate pedagogical practices?

Young learners achieve their Kindergarten outcomes best when their teachers value child-centredness, purposeful play and inquiry, and authentic literacy and numeracy experiences that also support social interactions, community building, and children's growing ability to regulate emotions and behaviours. We must consider children's social and emotional well-being as carefully as we do their physical well-being and our academic goals.

Reassurance

Parents' confidence in their children's safety while at Kindergarten is critical. Strengthening your own communication channels with families and actively promoting their engagement will alleviate parental anxiety and stress, and it will ensure continuity for children among their home, their child care centre (if applicable), and school. Continue to remind children and families that learning can happen anywhere—at school and at home.

Intentionality

Your specific plans for meaningful child-focused play and teacher-guided learning will need to be adapted from how they have been done in the past. The challenge is to reinforce among children the need to take the necessary precautions to prevent the spread of the virus without frightening them with warnings about the dangers.

Create a welcoming and caring environment that is also as safe as possible

Young learners continue to need lots of emotional guidance and support in order to feel safe enough to learn. There may be times when the benefit of a hug outweighs the risk of connection. For younger children, maintaining strict two-metre physical distance is less practical and, as such, you can consider how to minimize physical contact instead. It would be very difficult to expect young students to stay seated at assigned desks, since they learn with their whole bodies. Having the opportunity for choice time at play centres is important to their learning. On the other hand, while learning to share is often an important outcome for children in the first weeks of school, you should also plan for activities that do not require sharing of objects and toys.

Adapt the environment and routines


Thoughtfully assess your classroom layout, the shared spaces and structures in your room, and the play centres and materials that are usually available. Remove materials that are harder to clean and sanitize, such as plush toys, dress-up clothes, soft dolls, and sensory tables, but keep enough toys available to encourage individual play. Many materials and games can remain in use if children wash their hands before and after their use, but most will continue to need to be sanitized.

Think about your meeting space and how to bring children together for short teacher-guided times while maintaining some distance between them. Use visual prompts to help guide children. For example, mark off personal space with tape on the floor, hoops, or carpet squares. Alternatively, consider moving your whole group time outdoors!

Play centres are still recommended for Kindergarten classrooms, with some special adaptations that will allow young learners to play cooperatively with minimal contact and without the usual sharing of communal equipment/supplies. Limit the number of children at each play centre, allowing sufficient time to clean or remove used materials, before children rotate to another centre. Remove any toys without hard surfaces, as they cannot be easily cleaned. This may include some of the loose parts from nature that you have collected. While rocks and shells can be cleaned, straw baskets might not work this year.

Children will still experience power and agency as they make self-selected choices, and environmental cues help them to decide which play centre to visit. For example, a centre with two chairs indicates that two friends can play there.

Portion out learning materials into smaller individualized plastic bins with lids, and label each with a picture and the word that describes what it holds. Instead of keeping all the plastic building blocks together in one large centre, divide a comparable number of building blocks into several small, clear bins. To avoid any conflict, make sure each bin includes some people, some wheels, etc. Your art centre and writing centre will also include



individual containers of markers, pencils, scissors, crayons, etc. to encourage mark making and continued creativity without the need to share these objects between children. Try to aim for having at least twice as many play bins as Kindergarten children in your class.

Wood unit blocks are a fantastic resource for learning about key science and numeracy concepts through play. As blocks are hard-surfaced, children can continue to use them. After use, wipe blocks with soapy water, and then spray or wipe them down with a disinfectant. Let the surfaces dry completely after wiping them down. (Do not immerse blocks in water.) Ensure blocks are completely dry before stacking them away. Since hollow blocks are coated with a cleanable finish, they can be sanitized like other wood furniture.

Create new norms in your classroom during clean-up time by encouraging children to deposit their washable items in a designated “clean me” bucket or laundry basket or to place their plastic bin onto the “clean me” table.

To ensure handwashing is done correctly, frequently model handwashing at the start of the day and before going home, before and after outdoor play or recess, and before eating. Pay special attention to their nose wiping, coughing, sneezing, or crying, as well as their use of the washroom. Be creative! Engage the children in coming up with games and songs to encourage everyone to wash their hands for 20 seconds.

Listen to children

Children want and need to be heard, to ask questions, and to talk about their feelings in a place that feels safe to them. Remember that children are often listening when adults are talking about COVID-19 and they may be hearing misinformation in less supervised settings. It is important to correct this misinformation as you become aware of it.

Encourage and focus on purposeful play

Banning play due to the challenges of social distancing is not in children’s best interests. While it might seem simpler to assign worksheets or workbooks to children to keep them at their seats, Manitoba Education does not recommend their use in Kindergarten. Play is a powerful antidote to stress and can be very therapeutic for children who may have experienced trauma related to the impacts of COVID-19 on their family. Play promotes physical and mental health and development, and gives young learners an outlet for their energy, concerns, and emotions. The current situation presents many challenges for social engagement, but it can also be a source of creativity. To support play-based learning, continue to use small, washable manipulatives, collections of loose parts, dice, cards, etc.

Plan for symbolic play

Since the ability to think symbolically links closely to children's understandings of the symbols used in reading, writing, and numeracy, think about how you can continue to facilitate pretend play and story acting. Often, this kind of play takes place in the block centre, the dramatic play centre, and with small Playmobile®-type figurines, plastic animals, puppets, etc. Select materials such as blocks, small figures, and dolls that can be easily washed and keep these available to children. Encourage children to collaborate as they create the story plot, even while maintaining some distance between them. As always, keep paper, pencils, markers, crayons, and clipboards readily available to children to support their emerging writing while they play.

Use the outdoors

As long as the weather permits, plan to use your outdoor learning environment as much as possible, as it is easier to social distance when playing and learning outside. Children may play on play structures or play equipment (e.g., tire swings, playhouses) as long as physical distancing (no crowding) can be maintained and they clean their hands before and after. Sharing toys in an outside setting (e.g., a sandbox) is permitted as long as effective hand hygiene can be ensured before and after the play.

A time for learning, a time for joy

As you courageously (re)commit to your play-based Kindergarten approach, remember that the rich contexts for learning you create will also give children the courage they need. With you, they will wonder, pose their own questions, make their own discoveries, construct their own knowledge, communicate their findings, build positive attitudes toward school and lifelong learning, and enjoy friendships with fellow discoverers along their way.

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