

## RESEARCH

# Prioritizing Relationships and Relational Practices with Families Experiencing Social Marginalization

by Alison Gerlach and Diana Elliott

The findings from this study identified a relational approach to early childhood intervention that is relevant to all early childhood providers, administrators, and educators who are questioning how to support families with young children who experience multifaceted forms of marginalization, including poverty, systemic racism, and over-surveillance by child welfare authorities.

In Canada there are a growing number of early childhood programs that are designed and delivered specifically for Indigenous families and young children. However, there is a lack of published research on how Indigenous-specific early childhood programs influence the health and wellbeing of Indigenous families and young children. Our qualitative study involved understanding how “Aboriginal Infant Development Programs” (<https://aidp.b.c.ca>) in different urban municipalities in British Columbia (B.C.), Canada were responsive to Indigenous families’ priorities, strengths, and lived realities.



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Countries such as Canada, the United States, and Australia share a history of settler-colonialism that continues to have a profound influence on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous communities, families, and children. Promoting the health and wellbeing of Indigenous children requires that early childhood educators are knowledgeable about and responsive to the multiple historical and on-going impacts of colonization on families’ daily lives and their children’s health and developmental trajectories. It is also important to recognize that in many settler-colonial countries, Indigenous families can be hesitant about engaging in early childhood programs as a result of their experiences of systemic racism and discrimination, government-sanctioned over-surveillance, and fears that their children will be removed from their care.

AIDPs are provided in on- and off-reserve communities through diverse community-based organizations throughout B.C. and are unique to this province. Workers in these programs typically have training in early childhood educa-

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tion and provide intervention through a combination of home visiting, outreach, and group programming for Indigenous families with young children from birth up to school entry. Since their beginnings in 1992, when they emerged from a mainstream Infant Development Program, AIDPs have had the freedom to evolve and adapt. This research, undertaken in partnership with the AIDP leadership, sought to better understand *how* AIDPs engage families in their programs and *how* workers' routine practices are responsive to the contexts and complexities of families' everyday lives.

The research summarized in this article was originally published in *Health Sociology Review* (2016) and in *Social Care in the Community* (2017). The research involved semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 35 participants: Indigenous parents/primary caregivers (n=10) and Elders (n=4) involved in AIDPs; AIDP workers (n=18) who may/ may not have Indigenous ancestry, and administrative leaders of organizations that hosted AIDPs (n=3). An interview guide was developed with questions tailored for each participant group. For example, Indigenous parents were asked: "Can you describe what it was like when you first met your worker?" Program workers were asked: "How

did you engage with a parent who may be reluctant to meet with you or access your program?" Basic socio-demographic information was also collected from parents/caregivers and AIDP workers.

The findings highlight how AIDP program workers were implicitly relationally accountable to families, rather than their traditional and narrower professional early childhood agendas. AIDP workers' broader scope of relational practices included:

- spending extensive amounts of time gaining parents' trust in order to overcome parental concerns about having their parenting, circumstances, or lifestyle judged or having their children removed from their care.
- recognizing and reflecting on their "place of privilege" and being mindful of their assumptions and judgments in their relationships with families who often experience various forms of marginalization and discrimination.
- nurturing often long-term relationships between Elders and families, and helping parents and children in foster care to re/connect with diverse Indigenous knowledges and cultural practices.
- offering parents/caregivers choices as to where and how much they engaged in their programs, ranging from meeting one-on-one in a local coffee shop or in their home, to joining in a local drop-in playgroup.
- providing programs in community spaces and hubs where families feel safe and can have easy access to a range of social, cultural, and health programs and resources.
- fostering networks of belonging and support through creating safe and positive social spaces in group programs to help overcome mothers' and women-caregivers' experiences of social isolation and negative self-image.
- supporting parents to navigate and make greater use of the healthcare system for themselves and their children.
- buffering parents and children from the traumas of being involved in the child welfare system.
- delaying or deferring a focus on an individual child's development until trusting relationships are well established and the self-identified needs of the family as a whole had been met.

Relational perspectives have not been adequately explored in the field of early childhood education. These findings are

### Research Methods Summary

This research found that AIDPs have a broad scope of practice that is anchored in an implicit broad and relational view of family wellbeing that is: consistent with many Indigenous knowledge systems and approaches to health; expands beyond a focus on an individual child's early health and development, and recognizes the complexity of Indigenous children's health within diverse family and community contexts. The study identified that program workers, through their long-term and often intimate relationships within communities, learned from, rather than about, communities and families about their stories, histories, and lived realities. This relational process of knowing included understanding how families' access to basic determinants of health — particularly having enough food or a safe place to live — influenced their daily lives and immediate priorities. Also, how families' lives, parenting, and engagement in their programs were shaped by multifaceted social and structural factors that included: intergenerational family histories of trauma that were often rooted in Canada's history of forcing generations of children to attend residential schools; everyday experiences of systemic racism and discrimination, and over surveillance and intervention from child welfare authorities. A relational process of coming to know a family was a time intensive and ongoing process that evolved often over the course of several years.

important to the field of early childhood education because they illustrate how relational perspectives provide a broader, complex, and dynamic orientation to early intervention that recognizes and works toward addressing the influence of social and structural determinants on family wellbeing and mitigates the effects of early adversity on children's early health and development. The findings also, importantly, provide legitimacy to early childhood workers prioritizing relationships with and learning from families and communities who experience various forms of social marginalization. It is proposed that a relational orientation in early intervention can have a greater impact on fostering health equity for all children who experience structurally rooted social disadvantages, because it expands beyond traditional and normative approaches that tend to be child-focused. These findings have relevancy for all early childhood programs with families who experience social disadvantages in their daily lives, and raise questions about the need to rethink how education and training programs are adequately preparing early childhood workers to engage with the complexities of families' lives.

There is much research that needs to be undertaken in order to understand how to optimize the health, wellbeing, and development trajectory of Indigenous children who often experience multifaceted forms of social marginalization, including:

- what is the long-term impact of AIDPs on family wellbeing and children's health?
- how do AIDPs support parents to regain or retain their right to raise their children and thereby reduce the number of Indigenous children entering the child welfare system in B.C.?
- how can Indigenous-specific early childhood programs engage with teenage and young parents, and with fathers/male caregivers?
- how can relational perspectives of family wellbeing be embedded in early childhood educational programs?
- how can community, organizational, and structural policies and practices enhance Indigenous families' experiences of cultural safety in early childhood programs?
- how can early childhood policies and practices support a respectful understanding of diversity for Indigenous parents and early childhood educators who live in two worlds?

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## PRACTICE

# Knowing Yourself, Prioritizing Relationships, and Embracing Communities

by Lori Ryan and Rebecca Kantor

The research summarized in, “Prioritizing Relationships and Relational Practices with Families Experiencing Social Marginalization” by Alison Gerlach and Diana Elliott has much to offer early childhood educators, whether the educators are located in a classroom constructing daily life and curriculum with young children, or are located in the child and social welfare system providing home visitation, as is described in this article. Likewise, while the article provokes our thinking about one particular Indigenous community in Canada, we believe the findings are relevant and offer insight into working with many other diverse communities that might be different from our own. The field of early care and education is truly defined by relationships that include shared values and commitments. Those relationships shape our work with families regardless of location and/or learning context.

The authors, Gerlach and Elliott, list a “broad scope of relational practices” that extend beyond what they describe as “traditional and narrower early childhood agendas.” We have grouped the authors’ practice suggestions into three categories: 1) Knowing Oneself First and Avoiding Judgment, 2) Meeting Places that Recognize Families’ Desire for Trust and Safety, and 3) Navigating Complex Systems, and offer suggestions and resources to support educators as they implement them.

## Knowing Oneself First and Avoiding Judgment

An essential starting place for educators is to reflect upon their own life experiences within their unique and multiple cultural contexts (i.e., we must know ourselves before we can know others). New or heightened self-awareness can help educators recognize the influence and imposition of their own cultural identity in their work with others and, most importantly, avoid assumptions and judgments based upon their own cultural lenses. This is a crucial first step toward recognizing how one’s own background and values may differ from that of others and how it may interfere with the process of learning about the values and cultural practices of the families with whom they work. Recently, early childhood educators have begun to describe and recognize the influence of “implicit bias” and

the interference it causes (Allen & Steed, 2016; Tennenbaum & Ruck, 2007).

Revealing one’s implicit biases sets the stage for building what the authors describe as the most critical aspect of an educator’s work: a trusting relationship with families without the anxiety of judgment. Avoiding judgment is the most important priority with families experiencing social marginalization and a history of trauma and separation. We would go further and say that a judgment-free relationship is the foundation of work with all families and their young children. We also suggest that while this research is specific to Canadian Indigenous families, it is also important to search for the funds of knowledge specific to every community and family (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005). In other words, Indigenous communities might share features of their experience that create distinct characteristics, whether they are Australian, Canadian, or from the United States. Each community we encounter is distinct, so each must be understood uniquely in their cultural, historical, linguistic, and socio-economic contexts.

In our view, the most important approach that is foundational to all others is having a disposition of an “open learner” with an authentic curiosity about the families and children in our classroom or caseload. Families can sense if we as professionals truly want to know who they are, and what they bring to the educational partnership (including their unique



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characteristics, strengths, and challenges) or if we have come to “fix” them, make them fit our western, middle class ways of being, which then implicitly communicates their ways as inferior. For example, there are many examples of research programs that are designed to teach mothers how to share stories like white, middle class mothers share stories with their children. While there is value in learning this discourse pattern (because it is the same discourse pattern for sharing stories found in elementary schools), it would be wise to approach this pattern as additive instead of substitutive. Culturally responsive family literacy educators would start by discovering and honoring each family’s way of sharing story (which might not be text-based), and then bridge to additional ways of sharing story including the discourse pattern found in schools. Likewise, studies such as Hart and Risley’s (1995) vocabulary deficit study, while possibly convincing policy-makers to fund language and literacy programs, may leave families feeling judged and inferior and mistrusting of us as researchers and educators.

Early educators, as open learners themselves, recognize that their skill in asking meaningful and culturally responsive questions can open up a dialogue and can inspire shared learning about children that also supports the family’s educational journey. Meaningful questions not only help us get to know families well, but also empower families. When responding to meaningful questions, families feel uplifted in their attitudes about themselves and their abilities. Possible empowering questions might include:

- I am curious about your family story, even from your own childhood. Will you share a family story with me?
- When you have time with your family, what kinds of things do you like to do together?
- Can you share your hopes and dreams for your children with me?

While listening to families sharing stories, we as educators have a window into the experience and knowledge that children bring to our classrooms and home visiting practices. At the same time, these questions communicate a genuine interest in getting to know families, instead of making assumptions or imposing our cultural views about family life. Sharing our own family stories can also open up dialogue and trusting relationships.

In sum, while we agree with the researchers’ focus on spending extensive amounts of time gaining parents’ trust in order to overcome concerns about having their parenting, circumstances, or lifestyle, judged or having their children removed from their care, we also promote an open learner stance with questions as potential conversational openers. While we, too, advocate for recognizing and reflecting on our own “place of privilege” and being mindful of our assumptions and judgments in relationship with families who routinely experience various forms of marginalization, we also believe that knowing ourselves culturally, historically, linguistically,

### Resources

Exploring Cultural Concepts: Funds of Knowledge  
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/spring2spring-funds-of-knowledge-eng.pdf>

*Understanding Culture* by Shelley Zion, Elizabeth Kozleski, Mary Lou Fulton  
[www.researchgate.net/publication/296486383\\_Understanding\\_Culture](http://www.researchgate.net/publication/296486383_Understanding_Culture)

*Leading Anti-Bias Early Childhood Programs: A Guide for Change* by Louise Derman-Sparks, Debbie LeeKeenan & John Nimmo

*Anti-Bias Education for Young Children and Ourselves* by Louise Derman-Sparks & Julie Olsen Edwards

NAEYC’s *Code of Ethical Conduct* (2011)  
 “Ethical Responsibilities to Families”

Respect the dignity and preferences of each family and to make an effort to learn about its structure, culture, language, customs, and beliefs to ensure a culturally consistent environment for all children and families (I–2.5)

Acknowledge families’ childrearing values and their right to make decisions for their children (I–2.6)

tically, and economically is the pathway to this recognition of privilege.

Our family literacy example is aligned with the authors’ call to keep children connected with their diverse Indigenous knowledges and cultural practices that often have intergenerational origins. Thus, while we might introduce new social and learning practices, they are not meant to replace or obliterate families’ ways of knowing and being.

### Meeting Places that Recognize Families’ Desire for Trust and Safety

The researchers encourage us to think broadly about where learning happens and where relationships are developed. The act of offering families choices as to where we meet and how much parents engage in our programs recognizes families’ right to trust and safety. For example, they suggest local coffee shops and drop-in play spaces as options for meet-ups between educators and families and their children. Sometimes the most intimate and powerful context for building trust and safety and demonstrating learning opportunities is to meet in a family’s home. Visits to the family communicate a desire to learn about and experience the child’s familiar environment where cultural practices can be more easily shared and where families may feel more comfortable and empowered. It is important to recognize that some families may prefer an

alternative private meeting space, like a park or playground, rather than within their own homes. The more families have been hurt by well-intentioned welfare and education systems, the more intentional we must be in creating spaces that foster feelings of trust and safety.

Although we are aware of the barriers that educators may experience when considering the practice of visiting families in places of their choosing, including the resource of time and the potential safety concerns of going into neighborhoods unfamiliar to them, the benefits are great. The learning that occurs within a visit to the family in their community helps to identify and integrate elements of the family's culture into the formal school environment. Schools can then become less institutional environments, more homelike, and places where family culture and customs are valued and visible.

Including Elders and reconnecting family members that are in foster care programs is another suggestion that stems from the research. Nurturing those relationships provides a bigger picture of the family within their community context and can increase feelings of security. All early educators can consider how including anyone that the child would consider their important adults, from grandparents to neighbors or close friends, into relationship with the school or program might enhance opportunities for all involved.

### Navigating Complex Systems

The research authors identified that the complexity of systems such as healthcare and child welfare that families are navigating is part of what is traumatizing them. Building strong supportive relationships with self-aware educators can be a powerful way to buffer that trauma. The strong relationships that can heal wounds also support healthy development for everyone involved. Through those relationships, fostering the development of the whole-child and whole-family is the goal that most high-quality early care and education programs strive for. In reality, though, such practices might be accomplished more easily by professionals working in the social service system than educators working within early learning programs. Fortunately, some centers are able to include family liaisons and social workers as part of the team and they often have strategies and resources to add to the support for families. One example of a center built with such resources is the Dahlia Campus for Health and Wellbeing in Denver, Colorado. It is an inclusive wellness center, which at the suggestion of the local community offers services ranging from early education to a dental suite (<https://mhcd.org/dahlia-campus-for-health-well-being/>).

This is reminiscent of Zigler's 21st Century School model, in which schools were conceived as hubs of all the supports and services families with young children need. This approach, led by the Yale School of Medicine Child Study Center/Zigler Center, is present today in 1,300 schools across the United States (<http://medicine.yale.edu/childstudy/zigler/21c/>).

## Conclusion

### Educators

This research is valuable to educators because of the suggestions for innovative relational practices. While the research was conducted with a particular Canadian Indigenous community, the concepts and practices can easily be extended to other groups that have endured historical trauma. It also reminds us to think about groups of people who may have similar experiences, but may be overlooked (e.g. rural families in Appalachia). The timeliness of this article is poignant given current tensions in the U.S. regarding immigrants and the new traumas being created for them (e.g. undocumented families from México). There is great potential to learn from other countries whose citizens and educators are successfully addressing integration of diverse communities into their societies. Many of the practices described here are useful for diverse families, regardless of dislocation histories.

### Teacher educators

Teacher educators must ask how we can assist pre-service teachers in understanding families different from their own. In our teacher preparation program, we partner intentionally in community-based schools and early learning centers that are ideally suited to lay the foundation for and set these dispositions in motion. We also thread community-based field experiences throughout the students' four-year program of study and emphasize implicit bias and knowing oneself in all foundational courses.

Our profession needs more options and new models for working with Indigenous and native populations and all families that are strengths-based and grounded in trusting relationships. We see such a model in this description of the AIDP workers "through their long-term and often intimate relationships within communities, learnt from, rather than about, communities and families about their stories, histories, and lived realities."

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