

Early Childhood Education

[1974, revised 1995, 2005, 2015]

Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the term frequently applied to the education of young children from birth through age 8. A child's susceptibility and responsiveness to positive and enriching environmental influences during the first eight years of life has been well documented in educational, psychological and medical research. Provision of adequate opportunities for the full development of young children should be one of the top priorities of society. To this end, the education and care of young children is a joint responsibility of the home, school and society, and it is important that all work together to provide the best possible education for young children.

Society is concerned about the impact of the environment on the child from birth to adulthood. The period of early childhood begins at about three years, when the average child has acquired both speech and mobility and continues to about eight years when, normally, the child has acquired the capability of concrete thought. The physical, social, emotional and intellectual well-being and development of the child are interdependent and public education is the vehicle best suited to provide integrated, comprehensive and universal services to all children.

Nature and Function of Early Childhood Education

Early childhood education needs to provide students with purposeful educational experiences that are child-centred and will promote the development of the whole child. Early childhood education experiences should take place in a learning environment with multiple learning spaces or centres stimulated by interaction with other children, adults and manipulative materials. Hands-on experiences create authentic experiences in which children begin to feel a sense of mastery over their world.

Early childhood education should be experiential in nature and include a variety of approaches, such as inquiry- and project-based learning, that encourage self-selection and self-direction. Individual learning rates and styles must be accommodated because not all children learn, grow and mature at the same rate. In the classroom, teachers identify what intrigues their children and then allow the students to solve problems together. Activities that are based on children's interests provide motivation for learning. This fosters a love of learning, curiosity, attention and self-direction.

The primary function of early childhood education programs is the development of the whole child. Accordingly, programs need to be designed to meet particular learning interests, needs and abilities and should avoid a one-size-fits-all model or philosophy. All children must have the opportunity to participate in early childhood programs suited to developing the fullest potential of the individual. Kindergarten programs provide young children with vital and essential opportunities for early childhood development and early interventions and hence are an essential component of the total public education system.

Provision of and Support for Early Childhood Education

The Government of Alberta is responsible for providing, funding and coordinating a universally available early childhood education program through school boards to all Alberta children. Optimally, government funding needs to be adequate to establish a maximum class size of 15 for junior kindergarten and 17 for senior kindergarten and 15 for combined junior and senior kindergarten classes, all with at least one certificated teacher and one educational assistant or aide in each class. This lead responsibility, however, does not relieve other levels of government or other social agencies or individuals from their responsibilities to our young children. Early childhood education is a partnership between parents, teachers and society.

The school board is, at the community level, the appropriate agency to provide and coordinate early childhood education programs and to employ all teachers engaged in the provision of early childhood education services. Planning, implementation and evaluation of early childhood education programs are the responsibilities of certificated teachers who, in cooperation with aides and parent volunteers, can offer young children a range of educational experiences suited to their individual needs. The role of the educational assistant or aide and the parent volunteer is to support the certificated teacher in the delivery of early childhood education programs.

High-quality early childhood education programs for children from birth to age eight can have long-lasting, positive consequences for children's success in school and later in life.