Best Practices

For childhood environments and experiences that impact mental health and social emotional well-being throughout life.

the KALEiDOSCOPE project

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The Kaleidoscope Project

**Best Practices for childhood environments and experiences that impact
mental health and social emotional well-being throughout life.**

The Kaleidoscope Project is a community initiative that generates attention to and action around the critically important role healthy places and spaces play in the social and emotional development of children and families. Kaleidoscope works collaboratively to enhance the location and impact of places and spaces so that all children grow up nurtured by a positive, supportive environment, and become adults who benefit from and contribute to healthy communities.

Young Child Positive Mental Health

Positive mental health influences children's ability to learn, make sound decisions, and behave in positive and healthy ways. And children with high levels of social and emotional well-being are able to form connections with other people, better regulate their emotions, and develop positive coping mechanisms and resilience in the face of adversity—all of which help to serve them and their community as they develop into adulthood.

Places and Spaces

Young children's social emotional development (ages $0-8$) takes place within the caregiving environment around them, including both the social and physical environment. Environments are multifaceted, and children spend varied amounts of time in different settings. Key spaces include:

- Early childhood education/child care settings
- Pre-Kindergarten and elementary schools
- Parks/natural learning environments/playgrounds
- Recreation facilities/museums
- Family/community centers
- Common areas in public housing/neighborhoods
- Emergency housing facilities

Best Practices for Places

When we pay attention to these things, we can create spaces where children thrive. Many things work, both big and small. For example, when you are designing a space, think about window height. When speaking with a young child, be face to face. Do one thing; do many things; it all matters.

Build Positive Relationships
Staff and adults who are caring and responsive role models, and clear and open communicators, help children create warm and trusting relationships.

Use Nature to Nurture
The great outdoors can play a big role in children's healthy development — inspiring curiosity, encouraging creativity, spreading joy and relieving stress.

Create Diverse Spaces and Activities
Varied, engaging spaces invite children to experience lots of activities of different kinds, so they can explore and master new skills.

Foster Safety and Support
Comfortable, secure spaces make children feel at ease trying new things, accepting fun challenges and focusing on what's important: being a kid.

Enhance Accessibility and Inclusion
Welcoming, convenient spaces allow children of all abilities, cultures and backgrounds to feel at home and feel like a valued part of our community.

Guidance for Nurturing Relationships and Positive Communication

Nurturing relationships and positive communication in rich, growth-promoting environments build the foundation for future success. The guidance addresses relationships and communication, as well as the policies and procedures that will reinforce and help sustain these best practices.

These strategies highlight the role of relationships, interactions between caregivers and children, and children playing with each other. They promote development of healthy, warm, trusting relationships with caregivers; communications and self-regulation skills; positive peer relationships, and exploration in a developmentally-appropriate context.

Policy

- Organization supports hiring trained staff.
- Policies support practices to promote positive caregiver-child interaction.

Practice

- Activities provide opportunities for children to work and play together, to learn to solve conflicts productively, and participate in group activities.
- Activities use loose parts for play, structures that change and can be moved, and opportunities for caregivers to interact with children and each other. "Loose parts" are materials that children can move, carry, combine, redesign, and take apart and put back together in many different ways.
- Caregiving staff models how to engage children in developmentally-appropriate play activities for parents/guardians.
- Activities provide opportunities for interaction between caregivers and staff that support collaboration and foster a sense of community.
- Activities provide opportunities for families to extend play in the home environment.
- Activities encourage using materials that promote communication and cooperation among children, parents/guardians, other caregivers, and staff members.
- Practices and activities support caregiver interactions that are playful and curiosity-building to promote literacy and numerical concepts through signs and coaching.
- Practices and activities provide opportunity for choice in how parent/guardians and caregivers engage in a space (e.g., play or rest).
- Practices support and encourage continuous feedback from children, parents/guardians, caregivers and staff to monitor the implementation progress and areas for improvement.

Physical Characteristics

- Permanent features are tiered in size to allow caregivers to easily observe, interact and play with children in the space.
- Graphic and written signage clearly indicates the types of activities or materials available, and provides suggestions for developmentally appropriate interactions.
- Space is well-maintained, in good repair and appears welcoming and inviting.
- Space characteristics support caregiver comfort by ensuring clear "lines of sight" to observe and communicate with multiple children who are different ages and located in various areas of the space.
- Caregiver restorative areas (benches, spaces within spaces, etc.) are included to support caregiver's overall engagement and comfort in the space.
- Cozy areas, including soft furnishings and toys, support caregivers and children in engaging in quiet, reflective or relaxing activities.
- Space design includes fixed parts with multiple applications in order to allow for creative play (e.g., a slide that can also be a climber).
- Elements of the space allow for or reflect children's "design sense" or perspective—it may not look like what an adult would create.
- Multiple sets of materials are available with each activity/program to allow for more than one user at a time and to support social connections.

People

- Staff understand how to support caregivers in responding to children's needs by giving opportunities to expand play activities.
- Staff and volunteers receive training and other supportive resources to consistently model appropriate, positive and effective interactions.
- Staff receives guidance on what positive, developmentally-appropriate interactions are within the context of the physical space design.
- There's regular time provided for staff to reflect, and share best practices and user feedback with each other and management/leadership.

Best Practice: Use Nature to Nurture

These strategies use nature and/or natural elements (the use of green space, gardening areas, outdoor unstructured play, natural areas, natural shade, and fixed features) to support children's ability to explore and experiment. Use nature to develop self-regulation skills, family and peer relationships, self-esteem, communication and coping skills, experience mastery and challenge, and engage in appropriate risk taking.

Policy

- Support joint-use agreements with public and private green spaces (parks, playgrounds, undeveloped land, etc.).
- Encourage local efforts to provide or improve natural spaces in the community.
- Include a parent/guardian-teacher-staff communication plan emphasizing the importance of using nature/natural elements
- Include information about maintaining and caring for plants, trees and natural elements
- Encourage using plants that are child friendly, native to the local area, and promote interaction with local/native wildlife (e.g., birds, insects, etc.).

Practice

- Activities include outdoor programs and healthy eating practices.
- Schedule time outside on a regular basis.
- Activities are supported by guides/materials (listening guides, handouts, etc.) with suggestions for how to best use them and different ways to connect to the environment.
- Activities include opportunities to learn about and/or model environmental stewardship and sustainability practices.
- Practices encourage using and sharing of food grown on-site.
- Activities enhance caregiver comfort in interacting with nature/natural elements.

Physical Characteristics

- Space design includes the use of structures, or plants and trees that provide shade.
- Space design includes the use of plants to delineate areas of active and restorative play.
- Interior spaces provide views of green spaces through windows to bring the outdoors inside.
- Interior spaces use varied physical elements to create small areas of nature or natural elements within the space (e.g., planting seedlings, container gardens, water features, etc.).
- The space incorporates water and sand features or areas of water exploration.
- The space incorporates winding, curvy paths to support circulation and wheeled-toy use within the space.
- In outdoor spaces, grassy areas are available for games, activities, and events.

- Within the space, there are a variety of loose natural materials (e.g., loose soil, fallen leaves, sticks, rounded stones, flowers, etc.).
- Space design incorporates strategic, natural light features.
- Space design includes natural features such as logs and rocks that promote open-ended play.
- Graphic and written signage within the space highlights particular natural elements and describes options for engagement.

People
- There are continuing education opportunities for staff/volunteers are available regarding the benefits of nature for children's social and emotional development, as well as how to use natural elements within the space.
- Organizations actively seek out and engage local experts to provide training and support that optimizes use of natural elements within the space.

Best Practice: Create Diverse Spaces and Activities

Spaces fully implementing this practice are seen as open and accessible to the community, caregivers, and children. Spaces incorporate a variety of activities, styles of engagement and play, and developmentally-appropriate processes/procedures. They include areas for group activities, individual play or respite and help children explore and experiment, self-regulate, build self-esteem, cope, master challenges, and build positive relationships.

Policy
- Support planning that incorporates a diversity of activities from the beginning of the design process.
- State a clearly defined space and activity set-up and breakdown protocol in order to maintain diversity and integrity of activities, including instructions for rotation of toys, space dividers, and activity stations to ensure space diversity is maintained.
- Include a technology policy that guides terms of overall technology use by children and adults in the space (cell phone, Wi-Fi, etc.) and how technology is used within the space as part of program activities.

Practice
- Regularly encourage and promote linkage with local artists/artisans to provide décor/fixtures to inspire children to work with various materials.
- Use quick messages (e.g., signs, takeaway materials, etc.) to promote diverse play and suggest options for tailoring the activity to children's interests.
- Use familiar materials to encourage play that can be used at home.

Physical Characteristics
- Space includes a larger space with small sections/zones for creative and/or restorative play.
- Space has varied, multi-sensory experiences (e.g., music, art, water, soil, etc.) to encourage creative and diverse play experiences. Children's art is intentionally included in the space.
- The room is arranged to include a wide variety of age appropriate activities and loose parts for creative play.
- Activities encourage the use of a variety of toys that address multiple ages and developmental abilities (wheeled, stationary, movable, creative play, etc.).
- Space has caregiver-focused areas/activities (e.g., seating areas, water fountains, shade) to increase intergenerational use of space.

People
- Provide training and resources to staff on how to mentor users for optional space use to promote appropriate caregiver-child interaction.
- Provide opportunities for caregivers to learn about the appropriate use and accessibility of all space features.
- Staff and caregivers are able to play within the space.
- Provide staff with training and resources to engage children and caregivers in space activities and provides options to caregivers for fun and engaging play.
- Support staff through resources, policy, and procedures to allow children to initiate and develop play with found materials.

Best Practice: Foster Safety and Support

Spaces fully implementing this practice attend to physical safety, psychological safety, as well as supportive and protective practices for those using the space. This includes safety in fixed, movable, natural, and man-made features in addition to training and oversight for those in charge of managing the space and its users.

Policy

- Include a safety plan for how staff can encourage, maintain, and support substantive, challenging, and safe play.
- Clearly outline norms (including prohibited behaviors) for caring interactions among people in the space and with the space components.
- Create and maintain a service and upkeep guide, including who is responsible, onsite supplies and resources, anticipated costs, and preferred service vendors for all space features (water fountains, bathrooms, etc.).
- Support linkage to public transportation, including an on-site, clean, covered, and well-lit waiting area.
- Have a formalized crisis plan regarding emergencies that could arise in a space.
- Include policies for responsibility and liability including staff/volunteer behavior with children, weapons, regulatory compliance (i.e., OSHA), child abuse prevention and reporting, unaccompanied adult users, etc.
- Plan for identifying children's behavioral concerns/needs and appropriate intervention.
- Entrance areas are welcoming, inviting, and appealing to both children and adults, and clearly define the boundaries of the space.
- Support and encourage linkage with or creation of groups such as "neighborhood watch" to support safe use of space.
- Use community leaders to protect space (e.g., partner with police to reinforce safety messages).
- Staff and volunteers undergo background checks.

Practice

- Use "observation teams" that enter the space at designated times to observe families in use of the space and make recommendations for improvements related to safe use of space features.
- Space design and activities create purposeful structures, routines, and processes that help children manage their emotions to feel safe and secure.
- Staff members use supporting and encouraging verbal and non-verbal language to help users feel safe when engaging in play and to feel comfortable taking appropriate risks.
- Organization provides periodic open houses or "try it" demonstration sessions within the space.

Physical Characteristics

- Surfacing materials are safe and accessible (e.g., poured rubber, rubber tile, engineered carpet, etc.).
- Foot paths are lighted, clear, and free of obstruction.
- Bike paths are curved, level, and have appropriate lighting.
- Bathrooms and water fountains are easily seen and accessed.
- Space provides storage areas (such as lockers) for families.
- Space employs the use of soft furnishings and/or floor coverings in spaces frequented by very young children.
- Map of the space is available with "routes" clearly outlined for optimal space use, traffic flow, and emergency exits.
- Emergency contact locations are clearly marked and accessible or users receive clear direction for accessing emergency services using staff cell phones.

- Safety equipment and supplies (first aid kits, etc.) are readily available and staff/volunteers are trained in their use.
- Space includes quiet "calming" areas to assist in behavior management.
- Space is designed to avoid blind spots and provide clear lines of sight for caregivers within the space to observe multiple children simultaneously.

People

- Staff are educated about function and optimization of space characteristics (physical elements) with respect to supervision, engagement, and safety.
- Staff/volunteers are "mentors" within a space to demonstrate how to maximize supportive features that promote exploration of the space in an appropriate and safe fashion.
- Staff are trained and supported to effectively and confidently manage behavior including conflict between and among parents/guardians and children.
- Training of key staff in trauma-informed care and services is supported.

Best Practice: Enhance Accessibility and Inclusion

Spaces fully implementing this practice have policy, practice, and physical characteristics supporting physical and cultural accessibility and adaptability for the space and its users. This includes welcoming users with diverse needs as well as planning for how particular physical elements, program, and activities adapt for users of varying abilities help children explore and experiment, self-regulate, and build self-esteem.

Policy

- Employ universal design principles with new space or the refurbishment of existing space to ensure physical accessibility.
- Develop and maintain a food allergy/sensitivity screening and protocol for addressing severe allergies (e.g., use of an "EpiPen").
- Develop and maintain policies to engage people speaking multiple languages.
- Develop and maintain policies to engage children with physical, emotional, or sensory differences.
- Conduct an assessment of the composition and needs of the target community on a regular basis.
- Leadership interacts with and/or joins local networks serving similar populations.
- Promote financial accessibility of the space through fee structure, collection of contributions, etc.
- Registration policies are sensitive to documentation concerns by users from immigrant communities.
- Conduct an accessibility review on a regular basis to ensure physical and cultural accessibility of all permanent fixtures.

Practice

- Incorporate mentors from differing cultures and with varying needs.
- Provide mobile services that bring services to children and families in target neighborhoods and communities.
- Create and use promotional materials that reflect the diversity of the target community.
- Create feedback opportunities and systems to gather input from users and non-users of the space.
- Host events that are free and relate to the target community in order to maximize the impact of initial visits to the space.
- Promote the incorporation of transportation costs, schedules, routes, etc. into activity planning within the space.
- Strive to communicate aspects of the space (accessibility, cost, documentation) to families before they enter to improve understanding and preparation for optimal use of the space.
- Encourage the creation of support groups and play groups for parents/guardians with a potential affinity to each other.

Physical Characteristics

- Parking includes a number of spots designed and scaled for wheelchair access, proportional to anticipated users. Parking spots provide direct and safe access to the play space and allow for access by the driver.
- Surfacing materials are safe and accessible (e.g., poured rubber, rubber tile, engineered carpet, etc.).

- Accessible entry into a play space includes multiple entry points along a border of a play area and is provided through "flush access" (i.e., short or no "drop" from pathway to play structure).
- Variety of surfaces and textures creates zones, edges, and approaches, which help improve circulation through the space for people with sensory impairments.
- Flexible and moveable design features can be easily transformed by staff and/or users.
- Sensory, visual and/or auditory cues allow for changes in elevation, materials, and the need for adult/caregiver interaction.
- Paths throughout the space are accessible for children using a mobility apparatus (e.g., wheelchairs, walkers).
- Height of and access to fixed play spaces and fixtures (such as water fountains) support access for children and caregivers in wheelchairs or other mobility issues per Americans with Disabilities Act standards.
- Benches and seating areas are integrated with back support and arm rests for easy movement in and out of the bench.
- Seating areas are located on firm, stable surfaces such as asphalt, concrete, compacted crushed rock, and pavers.
- A space beside benches allows wheelchair users to sit next to or transfer to a bench.
- Include features aimed at physical development (climbing/balancing elements) and sensory input and experiences (tactile/textures, sound, etc.).
- Play areas have accessible paths to main walking areas and activities.
- Paths are connected to adjacent trails providing direct and clear circulation within the site. The internal paths also create a variety of loops that encourage play.
- Signs use multiple languages or use symbols to explain use or access.
- Translators or interpreters are available for events on an as-needed basis.
- Provide sensory experiences for varied needs including for children with sensory sensitivity.
- Changing rooms and bathrooms are fully accessible (ADA standards).
- Activities and materials reflect cultural and individual differences without promoting stereotypes (dolls with Down syndrome, Native American dolls).

People

- Staff/volunteers are trained to incorporate children with physical and emotional needs and/or cultural differences into play.
- Staff are trained to reach out to parent/guardians regarding the effective use of the space for children of varying abilities.
- Staff members are competent in providing information and coaching to parents/guardians to facilitate and equip them to use the space with their children.
- Staff members are prepared to foster child-child interactions across a range of abilities and cultures.
- Staff members are trained and have the ability to adapt activities for individual needs of users.
- Staff members understand cultural norms as they relate to family dynamics, effective approaches, and communications specific to young children.

Nurturing relationships and positive communication in rich, growth-promoting environments build the foundation for future success in all walks of life. According to the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2007), "The essence of quality in early childhood services is embodied in the expertise and skills of the staff, and in their capacity to build positive relationships with young children." Positive communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is the glue of these connections. Children who exemplify healthy social and emotional development are confident, can self-regulate, are independent, can separate successfully from parents or caregivers, have mutually satisfying friendships, are autonomous, and have empathy for others. The guidance below is for professionals, volunteers, managers, and organizations dedicated to improving the well-being and mental health of children in Wake County, especially those living in stressful circumstances in underserved communities.

Relationships
Supporting Positive, Developmentally Appropriate Relationships among Caregivers, Parents/Guardians and Children

Warm and trusting relationships are critical for healthy child development. Places and spaces can be intentionally created to support those relationships among caregivers, parents/guardians, and children. Best practices include:

Adult-Child Relationships
Parents/guardians, staff, and volunteers:
- Know what is developmentally appropriate and provide guidance with children's developmental levels in mind.
- Demonstrate availability through attention.
- Recognize that behavior is a form of communication.
- Provide consistency and predictability in daily activities.
- Prepare children for changes in routine and transitions.
- Help children identify and express emotions.
- Assist children in finding appropriate ways to calm and self-soothe.
- Provide clear behavior expectations with developmentally-appropriate consequences.
- Respond to a child's need for rest, to have time alone, or to be active.
- Encourage independence.
- Recognize successful separations (leaving) and actively engage with children upon return.
- Understand the social-emotional role of objects (stuffed animals, blankets) as connections to home or parents.
- Display affection and warmth.
- Provide supportive feedback and recognize effort.
- Separate behavior from the child as an individual.
- Encourage children to stick with difficult or challenging tasks.
- Model curiosity and exploration.
- Recognize that past experiences influence parental relationships with their own, and other, children.

Peer relationships
Parents/guardians, staff, and volunteers:
- Support child friendships.
- Assist children with the identification and understanding of others' emotions.
- Help children initiate and/or join peers in a variety of activities.
- Assist children with resolving conflicts and disagreements.
- Encourage turn-taking and sharing.
- Assist children in developing respect for differences in culture, gender, race, ability, religion, and family structure.

Parent-Staff/Volunteer Relationships
Together, parents and staff volunteers:
- Model healthy adult relationships (show respect for one another, listen to the other person, resolve conflicts with words and in a controlled manner, trust one another to complete tasks, etc.).
- Maintain confidentiality when appropriate.

- Demonstrate a willingness to share and learn from each other.
- Maintain appropriate professional and collaborative roles.
- Share important information with each other that may affect how a child feels or behaves.

Staff and Volunteer Relationships
Staff and volunteers:
- Regularly communicate necessary and appropriate information to one another.
- Collaborate with each other and co-support activities.
- Model healthy adult relationships (show respect for one another, listen to the other person, resolve conflicts with words and in a controlled manner, trust one another to complete tasks, etc.).
- Respect one another's opinions and differences. Maintain confidentiality, as appropriate.
- Share reactions in the interest of problem solving.
- Together, initiate, maintain, and help sustain broader relevant community relationships.

Communication
Supporting Positive, Developmentally Appropriate Communication among Caregivers, Parents/Guardians, and Children

Open, positive, and responsive communication directly impacts healthy social and emotional development and strengthens relationships. Environments can be intentionally created to support developmentally appropriate communication among caregivers, parents/guardians and children. Best practices include:

Adult-Child communication
Parents/guardians, staff, and volunteers:
- Listen.
- Respond to behaviors as forms of communication (What is this child trying to tell me when he/she whines?).
- Use appropriate language for a child's age and developmental level.
- Encourage children to use words to express emotions ("I don't like it when you take my pencil. It makes me angry.").
- Demonstrate respect and validate what children say ("I can see why you feel sad. It is hard to say good-bye to mommy.").
- Focus on children's interests as basis for conversation.
- Provide vocabulary for different emotions ("You stomped away from the sandbox. I am wondering if you are *angry* with your friends or *frustrated* because your bucket broke?").
- Recognize body language ("You went to the cozy corner and covered your face. That makes me wonder if you are worried about something or scared.").
- Assist in verbal conflict resolution (provide words if necessary).
- Speak to children at eye level and/or maintain eye contact with children.
- Match body language with affect, words, and volume.

- Provide ample time for children to respond.
- Maintain appropriate tone and volume.
- Avoid parroting (repeating exactly what has been said).
- Learn relevant words/phrases to communicate with linguistically-diverse children.
- Use children's names in conversation.
- Use non-judgmental, non-threatening, and non-shaming language.
- Ask for permission to participate in child's play or conversation ("Can I join in?").
- Provide reasons and explanations as developmentally appropriate.
- Ask for permission to make physical contact ("Can I give you a hug?").

Adult-Adult Communication

Parents/guardians, staff, and volunteers:
- Model appropriate, respectful language in conversation.
- Model appropriate language in resolving conflict.
- Protect children from inappropriate or confidential conversations/conflicts.
- Engage the assistance of an interpreter if needed.
- Ask for permission to make physical contact ("Is it okay if I give you a hug?").

Child-Child Communication

When communicating with peers, children can:
- Express feelings verbally.
- Use words to resolve conflict and solve problems.
- Exhibit empathy and caring in conversations.
- Can appropriately regulate the volume and tone of their voices.
- Recognize that their body language also communicates their feelings.

Kaleidoscope Partners

Lucy Daniels Center

Marbles Kids Museum

Natural Learning Initiative (College of Design, NCSU)

REACH, a program of Passage Home

John Rex Endowment

Wake County SmartStart

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