

Learning and joy in the pandemic: Manitoba kindergarten practice resource ^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Access online ^[2]

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 childcentredness, 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 social and emotional well-being as carefully as we do children's physical well-being.

Transition to Kindergarten

This year, you may need to reach out in some new ways over the summer to reduce anxiety, since many traditional orientation events were cancelled. This might include producing a short video or social story about Kindergarten that allows children to see the space and your smiling face, or writing personal letters or postcards to children over the summer. Once school begins again in the fall, it may also be necessary to have a staggered entrance and smaller groups.

Reassurance

Parent confidence in their children's safety while at Kindergarten is critical. Strengthen your own communication channels with families and actively promote their engagement. This will alleviate parental anxiety and stress, and ensure continuity for children between home, their childcare 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 may need to be adapted from how they have been done in the past. The challenge is to reinforce among the 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 usually available. Think about your meeting space and how to bring children together for short teacher-guided times. Use visual prompts to help guide children (for example, mark off personal space with tape on the floor, hoops, carpet squares, etc.; a play centre with two chairs indicates that two friends can play there). Remove materials that are harder to clean and sanitize, such as plush toys, dress-up clothes, and soft dolls. Consider how you can offer sensory play, such as water, sand, and modelling clay, for individual use. For example:

1. Divide modelling clay into personalized bags that have a child's name for their use only.
2. Offer individualized water play in small, easily disinfected basins rather than a communal water table.
3. Designate a bucket or laundry basket where children can deposit washable items after their use.

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.

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 frequently as possible, as it is easier to social distance when playing and learning outside. When indoors, ventilate your classroom, if possible, by keeping windows wide open.

Use technology wisely

Kindergarten children are high-touch and generally low-tech. It's possible that the fall return will blend physical class time with distance learning and that not all children will attend at the same time. Before incorporating technology, consider whether it will provide the most appropriate and effective avenue for meeting the learning outcomes you want to address. Reflect on how the learning experience fosters interaction between children at home and those who are physically present in your learning environment, as well as how technology can encourage exploration and discovery, and enhance or augment ongoing inquiry. Children should be creators, collaborators, communicators, and critical thinkers through technology infusion, rather than passive consumers of games or applications. To support play-based learning whether children are at home or in the school, continue to use small manipulatives, such as collections of loose parts, dice, cards, books, writing materials, etc., that can travel back and forth from home to school.

As you courageously (re)commit to your play-based Kindergarten approach, even during the pandemic, 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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