

More training needed to help kids with disabilities, say some early childhood educators in N.S. ^[1]

Revised version of province's early learning curriculum expected this spring

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Excerpts

Jenna LeBlanc thought she would be fully equipped to enter the child-care sector when she earned her diploma and became a certified early childhood educator (ECE), but once she got into the field, she realized she had a lot more to learn.

When it comes to working with kids with disabilities, LeBlanc said she often feels lost. Her first encounter on the job with a child who required one-on-one support was with a young girl who has cerebral palsy and uses a wheelchair.

"That was incredibly hard to navigate because I didn't know what I was doing," she said. "That sounds horrible, but I just did my best."

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But CBC News spoke to several ECEs who earned their diplomas from different schools across the province. Similarly to LeBlanc, many described feeling ill-prepared to work with kids with disabilities and said more specialized education was needed.

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She said a lack of resources, training and education are the biggest barriers when it comes to creating more child-care spaces for children with disabilities.

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She said most ECE diploma programs touch on autism, but not so much on more "complex needs."

Moreover, Towler said the responsibility typically falls on parents to come into the centre to show ECEs how to safely care for their child.

"We're not medically trained. If a child is tube-fed, the onus is on the family to teach our staff how to administer tube feeding, or rescue medication, or suctioning," she explained.

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She said a new version of Nova Scotia's early learning curriculum is coming out this spring, and will place greater emphasis on equity, diversity, inclusion and accessibility.

Part of implementing the new curriculum includes reworking a series of professional development modules that are available to ECEs, Higdon said.

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Disability-related workshops most popular

As of October 2023, there were 571 students enrolled in the ECE program at NSCC across the province, according to a communications advisor for the college. Throughout the program, students have several placement opportunities, which is likely where they would gain hands-on skills, according to Hill.

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In terms of the professional development modules, Hill said training for working with kids with disabilities or who require additional support is one of the most sought-after workshop topics.

"That's one of the topics that staff will look for because they need more resources, and they're looking for other strategies that they can use to help support these children," he said.

LeBlanc has attended several workshops through Mount Saint Vincent University and said they were helpful. She's even finishing up her

bachelor's degree in child and youth studies at the Mount in hopes of gaining more opportunities as an educator.

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