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Article abstract

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A Relational Children's Rights Approach to Sexuality Education with Young Children

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This article examines the responsibilities of early childhood educators to provide life- and health-affirming sexuality education in early learning contexts, framed within a relational rights-based perspective. Acknowledging that some educators may experience discomfort when engaging with this material, the article proposes two central tools of the field—reflective practice and a practice of relationships—as key instruments to transform anxieties into generative action and ethical practice.

Key words: *children's rights, early childhood education, sexuality education, reflective practice, ethical practice, relational practice*

I wrote the original manuscript for this article in 2024, when there was a rising tide of conservative and regressive attitudes toward both sexuality education and the lived experiences and existences of transgender, gender-nonconforming, and gender-independent children and adults. Since then, that tide has risen to a cresting wave in many contexts, as those sentiments have only grown more fierce—leading to several provincial governments going to extreme lengths to intervene in the autonomy and well-being of trans and gender-nonconforming children, preventing them from accessing life-saving supports, and putting legislation in place to make schools less safe while limiting children's access to sexuality education.

This article was originally entitled “Nothing To Be Afraid Of: A Relational Children's Rights

Approach to Sexuality Education with Young Children.” While this attitude should still hold true regarding the ways that early childhood educators (ECEs) can address ideas of consent and appropriate comprehensive sexuality education material in the early years, the increasingly dangerous climate regarding any issues related to gender, bodies, and childhood could likely provoke an even more heightened range of anxieties and fears. There *are* things to be afraid of now, or maybe more precisely, afraid *for*—the safety and well-being of gender-independent or nonconforming children in our care, regressive and controlling social attitudes creating increasing pressures in our societies, young people's access to life-saving and health-affirming information, and the potential backlash against our early learning workforce, who are primarily racialized and working-class women.

However, the central idea of this article is still valuable—that a relational interpretation of children's rights not only justifies but may also demand that we engage with appropriate comprehensive sexuality education in the early years in order to uphold our principles of ethical practice and our moral engagement as people who work with and care for young children. ECEs equipped with this approach could support all children in developing more generative and equitable attitudes toward these issues, work toward the sexual health and well-being of all children, and thus influence social attitudes for the better.

This said, I would counsel ECEs who want to honour their responsibilities to the children in their care by engaging with sexuality education in the early years to proceed with knowledge, preparation, and thoughtfulness. Educators should ground their curricular decisions in a clear understanding of the prevalent attitudes in their local contexts

and embed them within in a practice of relationships (Makovichuk et al., 2014; Stonehouse & Duffie, 2001) cultivated in their early childhood communities. My hope is that this article can contribute to their preparations.

“Big topics” in the playroom

I received an email from one of the ECEs at the lab school at my institution.¹ The message was entitled “Big Topics in the Playroom.” The educator was reaching out because the children in that particular playroom (ages 4.5–6 years) had been showing a lot of interest in bodies and body parts in their play and conversations—their own bodies, other people’s bodies, basically, any body they could think of. These were the topics the ECE was referring to. While the educators were initially startled by the children’s interest, they realized they wanted to affirm the children’s curiosity and have conversations about bodies and healthy boundaries without lecturing or using shame-based perspectives or language. I’m an assistant professor in early learning and curriculum studies, the faculty advisor for the educators at the lab school, and I have worked closely with the early childhood community as a researcher and advocate. Knowing that I was interested in the topic of sexuality education in early childhood, as well as in social justice pedagogies, the ECE reached out to me and asked if I had any resources to recommend to help support the playroom team in negotiating this process with children and families. I was honoured to be asked and inspired by the open approach to learning and teaching that the educators were taking. I gathered some of the innovative and reassuring resources available—popular articles for adults, picture books for children, one or two scholarly resources for anyone interested and motivated—and had a few conversations with the educator team. While the children’s interests have since shifted to other things, as children’s interests do, the ECEs in that playroom and I continue to work together to explore ways of supporting children, families, and educators in navigating the “big topics” of sexuality education in early childhood with sensitivity and gentleness.

Research and practice recommend that early learning and child care take an emergent pedagogical approach to responding to children’s interests with possibilities for play and exploration supported by skilled educators (Dahlberg et al., 2013; Makovichuk et al., 2014). When curiosities about bodies, sexuality, and well-being come up in early learning spaces, educators need to know how to respond to them. In this article I discuss sexuality education in early childhood contexts from the perspective of children’s rights. The goal of all sexuality education is to equip learners, regardless of their age, with information that will support them in healthy decision making, protect their health, and contribute to their identity formation and exploration (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; UNESCO et al., 2018; World Health Organization [WHO], 2026a, 2026b). In the context of early childhood, sexuality education is an introduction to information about bodies, boundaries, and consent (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016; Balter et al., 2021; Carroll, 2013; Cheung et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2023; Hickling, 2002; Sex Ed Rescue, 2026). This introductory information generally focuses on:

- learning about body diversity and body parts—healthy bodies come in all shapes and sizes, and difference is positive
- becoming familiar with anatomical terms—practicing using words such as head, shoulders, vulva, penis, nipples, knees, and toes
- introducing important relational concepts like consent and boundaries—practicing saying yes and no, listening carefully to people’s choices, and understanding that my body is my body and your body is your body.

However, ECEs can often feel uncertain about how to address these ideas and big-topic situations when they arise. They can be afraid to say the wrong thing, be unsure of their sexuality education knowledge or concerned

about family reactions, or just generally feel discomfort and embarrassment when these topics come up in early childhood contexts. These feelings can stem in part from contemporary political contexts and inherited discourses that frame bodies and sexuality as taboo or dirty. Negative perspectives regarding bodies and sexuality can often intersect with constructions of children as innocent (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016; Balter et al., 2021; Bialystok & Wright, 2019; van Vliet & Raby, 2008). These feelings may also arise from complex tensions regarding private versus public responsibility when it comes to teaching and learning about topics that can be emotionally charged, particularly when educators are unsure how families may feel. These anxious feelings can disrupt our ability to navigate these topics, creating a barrier when one of our primary responsibilities as ECEs is to collaborate with children and families, support children's curiosities, and create safe spaces for identity exploration.

In this article I explore the idea that drawing on children's rights perspectives in our thinking and practice can be an important way for ECEs to move through our discomfort and support children's curiosities and well-being. If we understand that children have a right to sexuality education, it becomes our responsibility as educators to help that right be fulfilled—particularly when sexuality education in the early years is as innocuous as it is. Children's rights are generally understood as guidelines and recommendations for the governments that agreed to them to be adapted into law and policy. This approach has resulted in significant change in the lives of many children around the world (Save the Children, 2026; WHO, 2026a, 2026b). In this article, I propose that a different approach—a relational approach to rights, which locates rights in interpersonal interactions—can help us to understand our role as ECEs in regard to sexuality education in the early years, and to navigate the uncertainty or discomfort that may arise when faced with big topics in the playroom. I have explored a relational approach to children's rights in other publications (Davies & Kenneally, 2020; Kenneally, 2017, 2022), and I will be using that perspective as my conceptual framework in this article. To illustrate my points, I draw on international research and literature and work to ground it within the context in which I live, work, and play as a white, cisgendered settler man in amiskwaciywâskahikan/Edmonton Treaty 6 Territory, Alberta, Canada.

Children's rights and rights-based approaches

In this first section I give a brief outline of what children's rights are by exploring the development of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC; United Nations, 1989). I then determine that children have a right to sexuality education, as set out in the UNCRC and as an aspect of ethical practice for ECEs. In the second section, I explore two ways of understanding children's rights. The first, which I call a *rights-in-law approach*, is the predominant way children's rights are understood and implemented. The second is a relational rights-based approach that I call a *rights-in-relationships approach*. In my exploration of a rights-in-relationships approach, I look at ways we as educators might put children's rights into practice in our early childhood communities. I contrast these approaches, not to set up a hierarchy between them—both are valuable, have tremendous influence on children's lives and well-being, and have enormous potential for change—but to show how one shapes the overarching social structures of our societies and the other might assist us in our day-to-day interactions with children and families.

The UNCRC is the international treaty that articulates children's rights as guidelines for UN state parties to adapt into laws and policy for their local contexts. Representatives from many nations and contexts contributed to the Convention's writing process, which lasted ten years, and it was officially accepted as a United Nations international treaty in 1989. It is monitored by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, which is a treaty body composed of 18 independent international experts as part of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), a branch of the United Nations organizations (OHCHR, 2026).

The UNCRC defines children as anyone under the age of 18. It consists of 54 articles that outline the various

elements thought to be necessary to cultivate the best possible childhoods in which children can survive and thrive. The language of rights frames these elements as entitlements—things that children ought to be provided because they are children. It is considered an aspirational and living document—something meant to be worked toward, added to, amended, and refined so that it more closely reflects children's experiences. While there is no enforcement branch of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the expectation is that if a nation's government has signed and ratified the UNCRC, it has committed to realizing children's rights in its institutions and social structures, and to enforcing them through its own laws and mechanisms of governance. The governments of state parties are expected to honour these commitments and support children in reaching their full potential.

The articles of the UNCRC can be categorized into three interrelated streams: provision of material aspects and environments for life and survival; protection from harm and exploitation; and participation in meaningful decision-making processes and other aspects of social life. The three streams are interrelated in that, while we can think of each of them as distinct, each requires the presence of the other two to be fully realized. While earlier international treaties had articulated children's provision and protection rights, the UNCRC distinguished itself in emphasizing that children are social actors and contributing members of their communities, and spaces should be made for their perspectives and voices in the ways societies are organized. Adults are recognized in the UNCRC as having more social power than children, and are conferred responsibilities to use that social power in children's best interests (Alderson, 2008; Hall & Rudkin, 2010; Lansdown, 1994, 2005; United Nations, 1989). The language of children's rights frames both institutions and adults as duty-bearers, and the duty they bear is to support children in fulfilling their rights.

The UNCRC has four principles at its foundation that are also expressed as specific articles. They are: Article 2: Nondiscrimination—meaning that all children have access to rights; Article 3: In the best interests of the child—what is beneficial to children's well-being should be taken as primary consideration in any action; Article 6: Survival and development—all children have the right to survive, thrive, and reach their full potential; and Article 12: The views of children—children's perspectives must be respected and considered in decision making. These principles are meant to guide policy, legislation, services, and programs pertaining to children's lives to promote their health, well-being, and safety and support them in experiencing the best possible childhood.

In the three decades since the UNCRC was adopted as an international treaty, it has been a source for the development of other international treaties and policies regarding children's rights. It has generated many programs and studies as researchers explore its implications and practitioners work to put it into practice. It has also been subject to critique as attitudes and understandings have changed. Some question that, without a system of enforcement, the UNCRC is limited in the ways it can improve children's lives (Brown, 2004; Mutua, 2002). At the particular historical and political moment of this writing, this is difficult to argue with, given the number of children suffering in contexts experiencing armed conflict and exploitation around the world. Additionally, given that it was drafted during the 1980s, it reflects the common assumptions and normative ideals of what it means to be a child that were popular at that time (Jones & Welch, 2018; Kenneally, 2017; Wells, 2018, 2021).

Upon reading the UNCRC with a critical eye in the 21st century, it is evident that the document conceptualizes an idealized child reflective of liberal theory—an autonomous, independent, rational subject often conceptualized as a white, upper-middle-class boy (Wells, 2021). In its efforts to determine universal values for a universal child, the UNCRC seems to work toward a particular model of childhood. Unfortunately, that model does not match the experiences of even the most privileged of children, and in some ways obscures the diversities of childhood. Adam Davies and I explored this elsewhere (Davies & Kenneally, 2020), showing that the liberal human rights framework needs to be generatively troubled, and a relational approach to children's rights can help with this troubling. In

that article, Davies and I think about the ways in which a relational approach to children's rights refocuses on interactions as spaces to enact rights in contextualized ways that are specific to the relationships between those involved. We used the lens of disability studies to "crip" children's rights frameworks—troubling the taken-for-granted assumptions about children as independent, autonomous, and rational subjects by asking questions about children who fall outside of those characteristics. We proposed not only that it is impossible for any child to fall within those liberal-theory subjective ideas, but that they really don't apply to adults either. None of us operates completely independently—we are all enmeshed in complex relationships that support our well-being and keep us housed, clothed, fed, healthy, and alive. Similarly, imagining children as embedded in entangled, situated relationships—while considering context and place and history—pulls us away from universalizing childhoods and obscuring the experiences and interrelations of children's lived experiences. This perspective has enormous potential to allow us to see children more clearly rather than work to fit them into a one-size-fits-all box—here are your rights.

We are not alone in this critique. Children's rights scholars and practitioners interrogate the liberal-theory ideologies upholding standardized and universal childhoods and children's rights by applying feminist, decolonial, antiracist, and class-conscious conceptual frameworks to the treaty itself and to children's rights practice (Davies & Kenneally, 2020; Hanson & Peleg, 2020; Liebel, 2023; McMellon & Tisdall, 2020; Saito & Kinnison, 2020). Acknowledging that the UNCRC is meant to be a living, adaptable document, in light of these imperfections the field of children's rights scholarship and practice continues to work toward ensuring that children around the world have access to the elements they need to survive and thrive. Sexuality education has been shown to contribute in significant ways to children's thriving in childhood and their lifelong well-being, and thus is acknowledged as a right, as I demonstrate in the next section.

Sexuality education is a right

Sexuality is considered by many to be an ongoing project of discovery—a journey that contributes in significant ways to a person's well-being throughout their life (UNESCO et al., 2018; WHO, 2026a). In considering this journey using a rights-based perspective, I draw on international research and policy recommendation documents. One of these primary documents is the International Technical Guidelines on Sexuality Education (ITGSE), first published in 2009 by UNESCO and collaborating stakeholder organizations and updated in 2018. The ITGSE collates evidence from studies conducted around the world regarding the impacts of sexuality education on a range of health outcomes, including knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural choices. It reports that the practice of equipping children with accurate information about sex, sexuality, and well-being in ways that make sense to them—in both school-based and informal settings—is increasingly being recognized in many countries as a tool for supporting young people in making responsible choices for themselves, protecting their long-term health and well-being, and developing awareness regarding healthy relationships, sexual exploitation, and gender equity (UNESCO et al., 2018).

The concept of evolving capacities is central to the UNCRC. According to Lansdown (2005, 2021), the term *evolving capacities* describes the idea that although children may have less knowledge and experience and fewer ways of expressing themselves than adults might, they are engaged in diverse and contextual learning processes of knowledge construction as they come to know and understand more about themselves, others, and the world. Children having less knowledge or experience does not make them less valuable, capable, or recognizable as people. Similarly, the ITGSE acknowledges that young people are not a homogenous group, and that culture, context, age, and life experiences all contribute to children's understanding of sexuality. At its core, however, is the understanding that children and youth have a right to information about sexuality in order to survive, thrive, and

work to reach their full potential. From a rights-based perspective, any approach to integrating sexuality education in the early years needs to take into account the evolving capacities of the particular group of children in question, and should be tailored in ways that make sense for them.

Evidence from the studies reported on in the ITGSE document show overwhelmingly that when children of all ages have access to clear, accurate, and evidence-based information and are provided with spaces in which they can ask questions and engage meaningfully, they make more informed and healthier choices that contribute to their overall well-being (Balter et al., 2021; Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; UNESCO et al., 2018; WHO, 2026a). In fact, research shows that abstinence-only education is not effective and only serves to reinforce negative behaviours and attitudes toward sexuality (Clonan-Roy et al., 2021; Santelli & Kantor, 2008; UNESCO et al., 2018; WHO, 2026b). Relying on this wealth of evidence and information, we can begin to feel the contours of understanding sexuality education as a right for all children. The next section examines the articles of the UNCRC in more detail.

Given the interrelatedness of rights, every article in the UNCRC can be understood as being connected with children's right to sexuality education. However, considering each as a distinct statement, several of the articles in the UNCRC support this right directly:

- Article 6, the right to survive and thrive, has an obvious connection with sexuality education, particularly in light of the significant beneficial health evidence provided by ITGSE (UNESCO et al., 2018) and similar research (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; WHO, 2026b).
- Article 13, the right to freedom of expression and right to information, speaks to children's right to access accurate, health-affirming, and potentially life-saving information while asserting that children also have the capacity and freedom to express themselves in a diversity of ways.
- Article 14, the right to freedom of thought, acknowledges that children have the capacity to form their own opinions and explore their own ideas, a concept profoundly related to healthy sexuality.
- Article 17 expands on children's right to media produced particularly for them, and in this context supports sexuality education curricula specifically designed for them.
- Article 24 explicitly articulates children's right to health and health education, and, as stated above, sexuality education falls squarely within this domain.
- Article 28, the right to education, and Article 29, the goals of education, are profoundly related to children's right to sexuality education, particularly when considering the evidence regarding positive health and well-being outcomes for children when they are provided with coherent, contextual, and curriculum-based sexuality education (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021; UNESCO et al., 2018; WHO, 2026a, 2026b). This evidence also includes reports of additional benefits regarding equitable access to schooling related to gender, reducing educational disruptions related to pregnancies, and connections between prolonged enrollment in education and getting out of poverty.
- Article 34, the right to be protected from sexual abuse, Article 35, the right to be protected from kidnap and trafficking, and Article 36, the right to be protected from exploitation of any kind, all connect directly with having access to sexuality education. As reported above, research demonstrates that the more knowledge children have regarding consent, boundaries, sexuality, and communication, the better they are able to contribute to their own safety (Balter et al., 2021; Jarkovská & Lamb; 2019; Kenny, Capri, et al., 2008; Kenny, Dinehart, et al., 2015; UNESCO et al., 2018; WHO, 2017, 2026a, 2026b).

Clearly, there is abundant support throughout the UNCRC for understanding sexuality education as a right for all children.

Rights-based approaches

In the next two sections I unpack two approaches to implementing children's rights: the more common approach that understands children's rights as being within the domain of law, policy, and governance; and the relational approach, an emerging perspective that complements the dominant legal understanding as a way to make children's rights tangible and understandable at an interpersonal level. As mentioned earlier in this article, I call these the rights-in-law approach and the rights-in-relationship approach.

Rights-in-law approach. The articles of the UNCRC are recommendations, and UN state parties are expected to take those recommendations and incorporate them into their government's laws and policies. The UNCRC was acclaimed and signed by a record-breaking number of UN member nation states, and ranks as the most popular and quickly ratified international treaty in the history of the UN (Alderson, 2008; Freeman, 2000, 2010, 2011; Human Rights Watch, 2014). In the rights-as-law approach, the language of entitlements is used to describe children's rights. This frames the governments of state parties as those primarily responsible for fulfilling children's rights, as they are expected to be the bodies that make decisions and monitor the distribution of resources. By committing to the UNCRC, governments have declared that they will prioritize issues affecting children, particularly as children do not have the civic rights accorded to adults (voting, representation) and are rarely provided a platform to address decision makers. In this approach, governments are expected to have children's best interests in mind in all their decisions.

However, although the reception of the UNCRC was strong and nearly unanimous, the implementation of children's rights has been uneven (Freeman, 2010; Kilkelly, 2017). Giving children political priority has been overshadowed by other economic and social dynamics since the UNCRC was established, and the political aspects of childhood compete with circulating discourses that downplay their contributions to and membership in society (Wells, 2021). Despite this unevenness, the legal approach to children's rights has had a significant transformative effect on childhoods worldwide—birth registration rates have increased while infant mortality rates have dropped; many more young children have access to primary education; and it has led to attitudinal shifts regarding the treatment of children on a global scale (Hausen & Launiala, 2015; Kilkelly, 2017; UNICEF, 2026).

The establishment of the UNCRC led to the drafting of other international treaties working to protect children, such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (OPSC), the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC), and the Optional Protocol on Communications Procedure (OP3 CRC; OHCHR, 2026). Each of these new protocols is optional, as state parties that signed and ratified the UNCRC can choose whether to adopt them into law for their country and still remain signatories to the original Convention.

Following a rights-as-law approach leads us to recommendations for practice from research and international policy documents regarding the provision of sexuality education in the early years, such as the development of courses and professional development opportunities focused on sexuality education pedagogies for preservice ECEs, or drafting educational policy for the provision of accurate evidence-based sexuality education at the community, educational district, regional, or provincial/territorial/state level (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016, 2018; Balter et al., 2021; Brouskeli & Sapountzis, 2017; Cheung et al., 2020; UNESCO et al., 2018). Building from this information, in the next section I explore the rights-in-relationships approach.

Rights-in-relationship approach. Increasingly, researchers are generating studies and literature suggesting a relational approach as a way of making children's rights more intelligible in day-to-day life and service provision with children. Alderson (2008) writes about the ways that children's rights reinforce the notion of young children as people and suggests that they can provide a framework for engaging children meaningfully in social life. Jones and Welch (2018) and Collins et al. (2021) recommend to service providers working with children that they integrate children's rights ideas into their interactions, finding that doing so makes their programs and services more collaborative, equitable, and responsive to the diverse needs of the children they serve. The contributors to Kanyal (2014), all members of the Early Childhood Research Group at Anglia Ruskin University, explore some of the ways that children's participation rights are facilitated by focusing on relationships and relational pedagogies. These authors foreground relationships as a means to realize children's rights.

Notably, the late Honourable Landon Pearson—a Canadian senator (1994–2005) acknowledged as a foundational advocate of children's rights in Canada—described her understanding of a relationship-based approach to children's rights in a lecture in 2012, saying:

First of all, I have learned that while there are a number of ways that we can frame issues that are related to children and youth, the human rights perspective is a particularly constructive one. Using it pushes you to engage directly with young people, and of course with the voices of women, and to let them help you find solutions to their problems that are likely to work. Secondly, human rights properly understood are about relationships, rather than about entitlements. They are about the relationships between individuals in society, and between individuals—either alone or in groups—and the state. (Pearson, 2012)

In relational approaches, the spaces where rights happen are translated from the realm of governments and international policy into relationships. Scholars and practitioners are invited to find ways of interpreting the articles and principles of the UNCRC into interpersonal actions rather than entitlements. To illustrate, I offer an example from my own research (Kenneally, 2021, 2022). Working with two kindergarten classrooms, the children and I explored some of the ways that they could see children's rights show up in their everyday lives. We first adapted children's rights principles into language that made sense to them—listening, sharing, and fairness became important words that we used to talk about equity, needs, and justice. The children and I talked and drew comics about listening and sharing, illustrating examples of children's rights in action. Our conversations were easy, and children demonstrated a rich and complex understanding of children's rights ideas and some of the different ways they took shape in their own experiences.

Relational approaches can make children's rights tangible and visible and offer adults concrete ways to talk about and enact them. As early childhood educators, we maintain many relationships—with children, with their families, with educators and other early childhood professionals, and with the institutions and governing bodies that structure our field. When we take the rights-in-relationship approach, all of these relationships become spaces for us to turn children's rights ideas into actions.

Rights and responsibilities

Having established sexuality education as a right for children, and having explored different ways of understanding rights, I want to take some time to investigate the connection between rights and responsibilities in early childhood practice. Rights and responsibilities are intrinsically linked, and an aspect of the interdependent and interrelated nature of rights means that rights holders must act responsibly to recognize and maintain the rights of others. In ideal rights relationships, everyone works to acknowledge and fulfil the rights of everyone else in reciprocal ways. As mentioned earlier, adults generally have more social power than children, and in this way have more

responsibility to work for and toward the rights of those with less social power. Adults, and the institutions and social structures that are controlled by them, are understood as duty bearers charged with supporting children in fulfilling their rights.

As professionals responsible for the care of young children, ECEs are often guided by codes of ethics that articulate their duties to children and families and outline the expectations of ethical practice. While relying solely on codified ethics to interpret what ethical practice should be has the potential to instrumentalize ECE practice into a technical enterprise, as suggested by Moss (2018) and Johnston (2022), in this exploration I lean on codes of ethics as examples of how the responsibilities of ECEs might be articulated and how ideas of children's rights are connected with those responsibilities.

An examination of several codes of ethics and standards for conduct for ECEs in Canadian contexts reveals that children's rights language can be found in each. For example, terms like *respect*, *diversity*, *equity*, *caring*, *relationships*, and *collaboration*—all strongly aligned with children's rights principles—appear almost universally. In some cases, children's rights are explicitly acknowledged and identified as an aspect of ethical practice. Many codes promote an understanding of children as unique and creative individuals and recommend cultivating relationships of respect, trust, care, and cooperation with children, families, and other educators. The following are some excerpts as illustration:

- “Child care practitioners work in ways that enhance human dignity in trusting, caring and cooperative relationships that respect the worth and uniqueness of the individual” (Canadian Child Care Federation, 2026b).
- “We work in ways that affirm and enhance human dignity, respect fundamental human rights, and celebrate difference and diversity” (Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia, 2021, p. 7).
- “In early childhood education: children have rights; meaningful, reciprocal, respectful relationships are at the core of our work; [and] children, families, and communities thrive with access to quality programs” (Manitoba Child Care Association, 2025, p. 1).
- In Alberta, the Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta is currently at work developing a provincial code of ethics for early childhood educators in which children's rights are explicitly named as being a vital aspect of ethical practice (M. Kleinfeld, personal communication, January 13, 2026).

The code of ethics developed by the College of Early Childhood Educators of Ontario (CECE) is an example of a document that makes an explicit connection between rights and responsibilities. The CECE was established in 2008. A self-regulatory body responsible for the governance of Ontario's registered early childhood educators (RECEs), it monitors registration requirements, ethical and professional standards, and professional development and maintains complaints and discipline processes for professional misconduct. The CECE's most recent code of ethics and standards came into effect in 2017. It sets out four ethical values and six standards of practice, and woven throughout both are concepts and language from children's rights frameworks. In particular, the ethical values in the code of ethics are framed in the language of responsibility, clearly outlining the expectations the College has for the ethical practice of ECEs in Ontario while at the same time charging the role of the ECE with influence and duty. The first ethic is *responsibilities to children*:

RECEs ... make the well-being, learning and care of children their foremost responsibility. They value the rights of children and create learning environments where all children can experience a sense of belonging and inclusion. RECEs foster children's joy of learning through child-centred and play-based

pedagogy.

RECEs respect and nurture children's first language and/or traditional language and culture. They demonstrate a commitment to address the unique rights and needs of Indigenous children and their families. They respect each child's uniqueness, dignity and potential. (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017a, p. 7)

The second ethic is *responsibilities to families*, which states that ethical practice means that RECEs should cultivate reciprocal and collaborative relationships with families based on respect, trust, and partnership to support the learning and well-being of children. The third ethic, *responsibilities to colleagues and to the profession*, maintains that ethical practice frames that ECE teams build respectful relationships founded on reflective practice, trust, and integrity. The final ethic, *responsibilities to the community and to the public*, entrusts RECEs with the responsibility for actively advocating for the well-being of children and families and communicating the value of early learning and child care to the public. In using rights-based ideas and language so explicitly and framing RECE ethical values as responsibilities, the CECE code of ethics charges educators with a duty to integrate children's rights into their practice.

The CECE code of ethics emphasizes the necessity of RECEs being aware of, understanding, and valuing children's rights. It instructs RECEs to create learning spaces that support children's unique identities and self-expression. It makes RECEs accountable for engaging in ethical practices that will contribute to children's lifelong journey of well-being. All of these ethics relate directly to putting sexuality education into practice in the early years. They clearly articulate that children's rights must be woven into early childhood practice. In the next section I describe some ways in which educators can apply a relational rights-based approach in their own context and reimagine their discomfort with the big topics of sexuality education as an opportunity to responsibly put children's rights into practice.

Reframing sexuality education: Rights, responsibilities, and relationships

Much of the research touched on already in this article reported that although many ECEs feel sexuality education in the early years is important, many also expressed feeling unprepared and uncomfortable if big topics came up. Some studies showed that educators felt they lacked the necessary depth of knowledge to integrate sexuality education in the early years (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016; Cheung et al., 2021; Counterman & Kirkwood, 2013; Davies et al., 2023). Educators also reported feelings of anxiety and embarrassment communicating about sexuality with children and families (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2018; Brouskeli & Sapountzis, 2017; Prioletta et al., 2024). In their study of Greek ECEs, Brouskeli and Sapountzis (2017) found that educators who received training focused on sexuality education in their preservice programs felt significantly more confident and comfortable than those who had not, suggesting that addressing sexuality education in ECE training programs is a viable way to increase both sexuality education knowledge and confidence in appropriate pedagogical approaches, in line with other perspectives in the field (Balter et al., 2021; WHO, 2017). Finally, some educators experience discomfort based on the ways that they conceptualize children and childhood. For example, Prioletta, Srouji, and Roy (2024) found in their study that while educators valued sexuality education as an important component of early years curricula, they felt hesitant to engage with the material based on their perceptions of children being ready for the information. The authors recommend that educators address this hesitancy by moving away from developmental conceptualizations of childhood and deficit understandings of children's capacities and instead reframe their image of the child as being capable of understanding the foundational concepts of sexuality education addressed in the early years. Their recommendation reinforces the relational rights-based approach I outline in this article.

Including sexuality education in postsecondary ECE training programs would contribute to ECEs’ knowledge and preparation, as recommended in research (Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016, 2018; Balter et al., 2021; Davies et al., 2023). Additionally, professional development related to early years sexuality pedagogies for ECEs already working in the field has the potential to be beneficial as well. Unfortunately, opportunities are already scarce for working educators given that the field is chronically underresourced. Calling for these changes is an important aspect for bolstering ECEs’ confidence. How likely are these changes, however, when policies limiting access to sexuality education and gender-affirming care for children of all ages are becoming more common across North America and in other contexts (Bialystok & Wright, 2019; Bialystok et al., 2020; Martino, 2022; Trans Legislation Tracker, 2023, 2024, 2025)? These policies endanger children and make it less likely that their rights are being realized.

A more immediate way to address ECEs’ negative feelings toward sexuality education, an internal shift that ECEs can engage with themselves, is by reframing these situations through a relational rights-based approach. Rather than understanding discomfort and embarrassment as barriers to effectively integrating sexuality education into early childhood practice, we could instead think of them as invitations to put children’s rights into action. Drawing on *Flight: Alberta’s Early Learning and Care Framework* (Makovichuk et al., 2014), I will work with two of its central concepts to show ways to engage in a relational rights-based approach for engaging with sexuality education: reflective practice and a practice of relationships.

Reflective practice for a relational rights-based approach to sexuality education

Reflective practice is one of the cornerstones in early childhood education, supporting our emergent approach to curriculum and assisting us in refining our pedagogies. It helps ground our theoretical knowledge by connecting it to our practice and personal experiences and supports us in our interpretation and meaning making. ECEs are encouraged to think critically about our interactions with the children in our care, our pedagogical approaches, and our theoretical knowledge of teaching and learning, constantly deepening and improving our practice (CECE, 2017b; Makovichuk et al., 2014). Observation and pedagogical documentation are key tools for reflecting on our interactions with others and on the influence of our planning; dialogue with other educators can also provide other perspectives while sparking new ideas. Using these tools, ECEs respond to and scaffold children’s interests as part of the emergent curriculum. If and when children become interested in big topics, ECEs are presented with an opportunity to integrate concepts of sexuality education into the already-existing planning and playroom activities of their emergent curriculum. Therefore, ECEs need to be comfortable and prepared to do so, having negotiated their assumptions, feelings, and discomfort in order to be ready to put children’s right to sexuality education into action.

Engaging in self-inquiry is a helpful means of interrogating and interrupting our assumptions, helping us to see situations in a new light. Reflection questions can prompt us to think more deeply about our own ideas and experiences and explore different possibilities. As a means for reframing discomfort, I propose the following sets of questions to support reflective practice within a relational rights-based approach.

Reframing discomfort about sexuality education in early childhood education: Reflective questions for ECEs

Rights
What do rights mean to you?
What do you know about rights, and what do you need to know about rights?

How do you feel about children’s rights?
How do you talk about children’s rights?
How do the children you work with demonstrate their understanding of children’s rights?
How do the families of the children you work with demonstrate their understanding of children’s rights?
What are some rights you can put into practice?
How does thinking about sexuality education being a right change your relationship with it?
Responsibilities
How might you describe your responsibilities as an early childhood educator?
What are some of the ways you fulfil your responsibilities to children, families, and other educators?
How do you talk about these responsibilities with other educators, and how do you put them into practice together?
What does responsible sexuality education in the early years look like for you?
How do you feel about the responsibility of integrating sexuality education into your practice?
What are some other models other ECEs are using to fulfil that responsibility?
Relationships
What are some of the ways you cultivate collaborative relationships?
How are your relationships with other educators collaborative?
In what ways are you uncomfortable with the concepts of sexuality education? In what ways are you comfortable with them?
What are some relationships you can draw on to become more comfortable talking about sexuality and well-being?
What are some ways you could collaborate with other educators to support integrating sexuality education into your practice?

What are some ways you could collaborate with families to support integrating sexuality education into your practice?

By engaging with questions like these, ECEs can interrogate their own perspectives and ideas and make space to explore new ones. They can also use the questions to spark conversations with other educators and with families.

Reflective practice also includes being aware of current materials and resources that can support you in the playroom. There is an emerging body of children's literature and resources that frame sexuality education as a right for children and as a pedagogy that can be adjusted for any age range. This body of knowledge is thoughtfully representative and presents information in ways that match young children's capacities for meaning making. Picture books like *Bodies are Cool* (Feder, 2021) and *Tell Me About Sex, Grandma* (Higginbotham, 2021) and books from the First Conversations series—for example, *Being You: A First Conversation About Gender* (Madison, Ralli, & Passchier, 2021), *Yes! No!: A First Conversation About Consent* (Madison, Ralli, & Roxas, 2022), and *Every Body: A First Conversation about Bodies* (Madison, Ralli, & Andrews, 2023)—provide ECEs and families with informative resources specifically designed for early learning contexts. Investigating examples of media such as these, and including them in the playroom, has the potential to influence the ways early childhood discourses around consent, disability, and diversity are changing.

Another example of assets for supporting ECEs' reflective practice around sexuality education is online resources such as Cath Hakanson's Sex Ed Rescue (2026). Hakanson is an Australia-based sex educator, and her website is organized by age group from infants to 18 years. It contains informative material in many media (text, video, FAQs), and Hakanson's writing is accessible and reassuring. While much of the website is geared toward families, it is very adaptable for ECEs as a resource for personal and professional development. Hakanson takes a gentle, relational, and rights-based approach that encourages dialogue and acknowledges diversity as par for the course, and her perspective frames sexuality education as vital information for people of any age. A similar resource specifically for Canadian contexts is the gender and gender diversity in early childhood education course originally developed by Dr. Lindsay Herriot and The Early Learning Hive to align with the B.C. Early Learning Framework (Government of British Columbia, 2019), now offered by the Canadian Child Care Federation (2026a). The course supports ECEs' reflective exploration of topics of gender and gender diversity in early childhood. It also offers additional resources for educators and families.

Flight: Alberta's Early Learning and Care Framework (Makovichuk et al., 2014) encourages ECEs to engage in reflective practice through observing, identifying, and scaffolding children's learning in a process of "noticing, naming, and nurturing" (p. 61). When it comes to moments of discomfort or uncertainty with sexuality education in the early years, we can apply this process to ourselves—we can notice our feelings, name them for what they are, and nurture new strategies, become comfortable with fulfilling children's right to sexuality education, and dispel any misunderstandings that sexuality is not an appropriate topic for early learning contexts. Noticing, naming, and nurturing ourselves through our discomfort and embarrassment presents us with even further opportunity to refine our practice and be better equipped to support the children and families we work with.

A practice of relationships for a relational rights-based approach to sexuality education

A practice of relationships is a concept drawn from an Australian early childhood service provision framework (Stonehouse & Duffie, 2001). *Flight* (Makovichuk et al., 2014) interprets the concept to mean the process of engaging in "complex and dynamic relationships with diverse community members" (p. 50) that support learning and meaning making for everyone involved. Each community member is recognized as a person, and

the contributions each makes to the whole community are acknowledged. Early childhood communities are shared spaces where each family's values and funds of knowledge are welcomed and brought into balance with the needs of that particular group of children. Taking an explicitly rights-based perspective can clarify the values of an early childhood community, and a practice of relationships can help to make transparent the negotiation work of building community together. These relationships are best understood as collaborative partnerships in which children, educators, family members, and other early childhood professionals are seen as co-learners, co-researchers, and co-imaginors of possibilities, everyone making meaning together (Makovichuk et al., 2014). A practice of relationships knits an early childhood community together in processes of shared discovery.

In a practice of relationships, families are understood as allies. This takes effort and courage, and the community that is built from these efforts is exceedingly worthwhile. Educators and families can become resources for each other—so if children express curiosity about bodies or different kinds of relationships, or ask questions about where babies come from, educators and families can work together to nurture children's interests as they explore this facet of well-being.

Families often rely on the specialized knowledge and experience of ECEs when faced with the constant change and learning of early childhood. Investing in a practice of relationships reinforces the reciprocal nature of the connections and interactions in an early childhood community—children, educators, and families all collaborating together as they learn and grow. ECEs can help families see the value of children's rights and work out ways to put them into practice in child care and home contexts (Murray, 2020). Cultivating connections from within a practice of relationships has tremendous potential for diffusing any anxieties ECEs might feel when such interests arise, as they have already developed a network of trust and connection. Without this trust and connection, broaching such topics might feel daunting to both educators and families. With strong lines of communication already established, educators and families can negotiate any concerns that arise regarding sexuality education. Against the backdrop of the shared space of the early childhood community—and contextualized by ECEs' knowledge of themselves, their practice, and sexuality education pedagogies—concerns can be met and worked through with a commitment to generative communication and ethical, responsible practice.

Equipping ourselves

My sincere hope is that after accompanying me on this exploration, ECEs understand that engaging in a relational rights-based approach can diffuse much of their fear and discomfort regarding sexuality education in the early years. When sexuality education is viewed as a right, integrating it can become a way to do the necessary and innovative work of putting children's rights into practice. It is equally vital for educators to be aware of the contemporary social and political climate and discourse regarding sexuality education—and feel ready to help others to understand what sexuality education in the early years consists of and how best to address big topics when they come up in the playroom. Concepts related to consent, bodies, and boundaries are valuable ideas for people of every age. Being well informed about current political and social debates that shape attitudes and understandings regarding sexuality education in the early years can equip educators with the knowledge they need to frame the ways they integrate sexuality education into their curriculum decisions or address any concerns that might arise in their early childhood communities. ECEs are well positioned within their networks of relationships to have a significant impact on children's sexual health and well-being for years to come, by beginning the journey of sexuality education in early learning contexts.

It is also important that educators recognize the power in challenging their own assumptions and discomfort. Fulfilling our responsibilities to children and families is an important way for us to engage in ethical practice.

Grappling with our anxieties regarding sexuality education in the early years is a way of refining the art, science, and craft of early childhood pedagogy. ECEs can do this by taking a relational rights-based approach—by engaging in reflective practice, by building inclusive communities with a practice of relationships, and by putting children's rights into action. This approach has the potential to alter our social landscapes and contribute to the lifelong well-being of the children in our care.

1 The author has permission from lab school educators to share the relevant narratives detailed in this article.

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