

Planning for Intentional and Effective Places and Spaces for Children's Positive Mental Health Integrated Plan

Best Practice Indicator Framework



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B. Best Practice Indicator Framework

USING THIS DOCUMENT

The Best Practice Indicator framework is a resource for organizations seeking to affect young children’s positive mental health using their environments and spaces. The framework provides guidance on the following questions:

1. **What** do places and spaces need to best promote children’s positive mental health?

Each Best Practice Indicator (BPI) section of this document represents an area of practice that emerged as critical for maximizing the impact of space and environment on children’s positive mental health. The indicators stem from the research literature review and expert interview components of the project.

2. **Why** is each of the Best Practice Indicators important?

Research and practice link each BPI to one or more “Key Early Childhood Mental Health Developmental Tasks.” These tasks indicate the most likely effect on young children of implementing and/or improving performance in the practice area.

3. **How** can an organization implement these best practices?

The featured implementation strategies are grouped according to policy, practice, physical characteristics, and person-centered approaches. The strategies listed with each BPI are neither exhaustive nor required but provide a basis for initiating innovation and change within a space or environment.

Depending on their areas of interest and other factors, organizations may wish to consider one or multiple BPIs. For example, an organization whose primary goal is to add an outdoor learning environment may focus exclusively on the Use of Nature/Natural elements Indicator. A different organization might initially focus on all of the BPIs if the organization has not yet chosen its focus area or areas. Being able to select the most appropriate and meaningful BPIs at different times and for different contexts is an important feature of the project’s recommendations.

It is hoped that through the use of this document, in addition to other assessment and quality improvement tools and supports, organizations will be able to develop implementation and sustainability plans for their spaces that will promote positive mental health for the young children they serve.

Supporting Positive, Developmentally Appropriate Interactions
Among Caregivers, Parent/Guardians, Providers, and Children

Use of Nature/Natural Elements

Diversity of Space and Activities

Safety and Support

Accessibility and Inclusiveness

Sustainability

THE JOHN REX ENDOWMENT BELIEVES SHAPING CHILDREN’S PLACES AND SPACES, SUCH AS CHILD CARE CENTERS, PARKS AND RECREATION FACILITIES, AND PRESCHOOLS, IS OUR FOUNDATION’S BEST OPPORTUNITY TO SUPPORT WAKE COUNTY CHILDREN’S POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH.

– JOHN REX ENDOWMENT

BACKGROUND

In 2013, with the fundamental belief that all children should be able to reach their full potential, the John Rex Endowment developed its five-year *Our Plan for Impact, 2013–2018*. In recognition of the changing landscape in Wake County (e.g., rapidly growing population, increased land development, increased cultural diversity, and areas of growing need), the John Rex Endowment focused this plan on supporting an environment that optimizes community resources and extends the reach of innovative and sustainable programs. The third of five goals outlined in the plan states the John Rex Endowment’s recognition that healthy environments must be actively supported in

order to promote positive mental health in young children ages birth through eight years. In support of this goal, the John Rex Endowment, which “supports an environment where children and families in greater Wake County live healthy lives” (John Rex Endowment mission), intends to focus not only on how the physical characteristics of spaces can influence emotional development but also on how the people, policies, practices, programs, and physical elements of a place or space can become more intentional and effective in promoting children’s positive mental health (John Rex Endowment, 2013).

PROJECT PHASES

In April 2014, the John Rex Endowment awarded a grant to the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy (CCFP). In collaboration with the Center for Child & Family Health and consultants, CCFP created an Integrated Plan to support Wake County organizations seeking to integrate, into their existing spaces, design and implementation practices that support positive mental health in young children. The project team assembled an immense catalog of information, including input from providers, parents/guardians, other community stakeholders, and researchers, and literature.

Activity	Apr. 2014	May 2014	June 2014	July 2014	Aug. 2014	Sept. 2014	Oct. 2014	Nov. 2014	Dec. 2014
PHASE I									
Identify research staff, project orientation	X	X							
Stakeholder Council			X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Best practice research		X	X	X	X	X			
Case study compilation					X	X			
Interviews			X	X	X	X			
Focus groups				X	X	X			
Surveys					X	X	X		
PHASE II									
Expert Panel							X		
PHASE III									
Finalize best practice profiles							X		
Develop integrated implementation framework							X	X	X
Develop key metrics for implementation							X	X	X
Develop TA manual including CQI tools & resources								X	X
Develop Integrated Plan								X	X
Ongoing evaluation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X

Project timeline

The initial phase of the project (April - October 2014) included an extensive review of peer-reviewed literature; interviews with local, national, and international experts; compilation of a catalog of innovative and effective case studies exemplifying best practice; focus groups with local providers, parent/guardian and caregivers, and young child experts; surveys of service providers and families; and tours of two best practice spaces. In addition, the project team established a local *Stakeholder Council* that met throughout the project to provide input about Wake County conditions, to review materials, and to provide guidance regarding the directions and activities of the project. In July, the Stakeholder Council reviewed the products of the project’s first phase. This led to recommendations for more in-depth explorations of example programs and Best Practice Indicators that would form the foundation for subsequent phases of the project. To support this effort, Stakeholder Council members considered the literature review and case study catalog in addition to expert interviews. Based on input from the Stakeholder Council, the project team produced case studies about the following organizations:

1. **Blanchie Carter Discovery Park at Southern Pines Primary School**, Southern Pines, NC. This is a schoolyard at a primary school, which uses universal design and focuses on nature and imaginative play. It serves 425 children in Kindergarten through second grade.
2. **Mothers’ Club Family Learning Center**, Pasadena, CA. This is a family/community center integrating two-generation learning, caregiver mental health services, and developmentally appropriate design. It serves 120 children, ages six weeks to five years old.
3. **Kids Together Playground at Marla Dorrel Park**, Cary, NC. This public park has a diversity of play areas and structures based on universal design principles and with an emphasis on nature. It primarily serves families in Cary with children, ages two to twelve years.

4. **Great Beginnings Early Education Center**, Lee’s Summit, MO. This early education center for special needs students incorporates family counseling services and a community space. It serves 229 low-income children ages three to five years.
5. **Mariposa Redevelopment Master Plan and Healthy Living Initiative**, Denver, CO. This is a low-income housing development and a neighborhood that is transit-oriented and fosters community engagement to develop improvements in safety and attractiveness.

Drawing on all the products of the initial phase of the project, the following key themes emerged that reflect Best Practice Indicators and sustainability drivers:

- Relationships among and between users of the space matter as much, or more, than the physical characteristics of the space.
- Caregivers’ mental health is correlated with children’s mental health. Improving spaces with an eye to both caregivers and children will maximize impact.
- Green spaces and incorporation of natural elements within a space are important to every type of space from housing to education to hospitals.
- Creativity and diversity in children’s environments contributes to their social and emotional well-being.
- Safety (both physical and psychological) in the space matters.
- Spaces should attend to the suitability and usability of spaces for children with special needs (physical, emotional, developmental) and children of varied ages and cultural/linguistic backgrounds.
- Access is a major factor for both implementation and sustainability. These challenges include the cost to access a space (e.g., admission), availability of local/public transportation to access the space, and scheduling to accommodate children’s needs.
- Community input and development is key to creating spaces with long-term impact within a community.
- There is a need for training of parents/guardians/caregivers and service providers on how to use spaces.

EXPERT PANEL

The Expert Panel, which met in late October 2014, used the themes outlined by the Stakeholder Council and refined a framework of Best Practice Indicators and sustainability drivers with corresponding strategies designed to achieve maximum impact relative to type of space and area of focus (e.g., policy, practice, physical characteristics).

Through a series of facilitated small group discussions and development sessions, experts from the areas of young child mental health, indoor and outdoor space design, early childhood education, schools, parks/recreation, child welfare, crisis intervention, physical health, public health, developmental disabilities, museums, program implementation, and community advocacy for vulnerable populations compiled a Best Practice Indicator framework related to the design and implementation of effective and sustainable places and spaces that promote children’s positive mental health. These Best Practice Indicators framework was developed in conjunction with a set of Quality Improvement Tools (found here [/hyperlink](#)). Used together, these two resources facilitate the implementation of space design and improvement, from planning to sustainability.

BEST PRACTICE INDICATORS:

- **Supporting positive, developmentally-appropriate interactions among caregivers, parents/guardians, providers, and children**
- **Use of nature/natural elements**
- **Diversity of space and activities**
- **Safety and support**
- **Accessibility and inclusiveness**

SUSTAINABILITY DRIVERS:

- **Availability of funding**
- **Access**
- **Reach**
- **Utilization**

DEFINITIONS: SETTING THE STAGE

For this project, the concepts central to developing a Best Practice Indicator framework are young child positive mental health, vulnerability, and places and spaces.

Young Child Positive Mental Health

Mental health is “a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community” (World Health Organization, WHO, n.d.). The positive aspects of health are underscored in this definition, which encompasses an overall state of well-being, “not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO, 2006).

This project focuses on the mental health of young children, defined as ages birth to eight. Defining positive mental health for young children, requires consideration of their developmental needs and tasks. The organization Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers, and their Families, defines early childhood mental health as: “the child’s capacity to experience, regulate, and express emotion, form close relationships, and explore the environment and learn” (Zero to Three, 2001). It is noted that the caregiving environment is central to the development of early childhood mental health, including consideration of family, community, and cultural expectations for young children (Zero to Three, 2001).

Positive mental health influences children’s ability to learn, to make sound decisions, and to behave in positive and healthy ways (National Research Council, 2000; North Carolina Institute of Medicine, 2012). Further, children with high levels of social and emotional well-being also are able to form secure attachments and connections to other people, can better regulate their emotions, and can 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 (North Carolina Institute of Medicine, 2012; World Health Organization, n.d.).

Vulnerability

The John Rex Endowment is committed to supporting efforts aimed at Wake County’s most vulnerable residents. The John Rex Endowment conceptualizes vulnerability as disparities in the ability to lead a healthy life, in particular in mental health outcomes. The factors that influence the ability to lead a healthy life are numerous and complex. Relevant factors considered in this project include, but are not limited to: immigrant status, poverty, parental low education, racial and ethnic disparities, and experiencing significant early childhood adversity (e.g., trauma, toxic stress).

Places and Spaces

As noted above, young children’s social emotional development takes place within, and cannot be separated from, the caregiving environment around them, including the social and physical environment. Young children’s environments are multifaceted, and children spend varied amounts of time in different settings. For the purposes of this project, the primary settings are those in which children and their families spend a significant amount of time. Although other settings may affect a large number of children (e.g., doctors’ offices, court or office waiting rooms), it is expected that the amount and depth of time spent in a space will influence the impact of the space on development and mental health. Key types of spaces considered include (though may not be limited to):

- Early childhood education/child care settings (indoor and outdoor)
- Pre-Kindergarten and elementary schools (indoor and outdoor)

- Parks/natural learning environments/playgrounds (outdoor)
- Recreation facilities/museums (indoor)
- Family/community centers
- Common areas in public housing/neighborhoods
- Emergency housing facilities.

BUILDING A BEST PRACTICE INDICATOR FRAMEWORK

Following is the project’s Best Practice Indicator framework organized according to the Best Practice Indicators and associated implementation strategies drawn from the extensive research completed in the first phase of the project and carefully considered by the Expert Panel. “Best practices” include methods or techniques that consistently demonstrate superior results. With regard to this project, the literature on the strategies and mechanisms by which environments influence young children is still growing. Thus, this list is not exhaustive. Moreover, it is expected that this framework and the strategies therein will evolve and change as researchers and practitioners develop and design improvements and practices.

Supporting Positive, Developmentally Appropriate Interactions Between Caregivers, Parents/Guardians, Providers, and Children

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

POLICY

- Organization policy supports using trained practitioners as staff.
- Organization policy specifically addresses and supports practices that promote positive caregiver-child interaction.

PRACTICE

- Space activities are structured to provide opportunities for children to work and play together, to learn to solve conflicts in productive ways, and to participate in peer-group activities.
- Space activities utilize loose parts intended for play, mobile/variable structures, and other 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.
- Organization practices support the use of staff as mentors within the space and modeling for parents/guardians on how to engage children in developmentally appropriate play activities.
- Space activities provide opportunities for interaction between caregivers and organization staff to support collaboration and to foster a sense of community.
- Space activities provide opportunities for families to extend the play in the home environment.
- Space activities promote the use of materials that encourage communication and cooperation among users of the space, namely children, parents/guardians, other caregivers, and staff members.
- Organization practices and activities support playful and curiosity-building caregiver interactions that promote literacy and numerical concepts through coaching and signage.
- Organization practices and activities provide opportunity for choice in how parent/guardians and caregivers engage in the space (e.g., play or respite).
- Organization practices support and encourage a feedback loop between space users and staff to monitor the implementation progress and areas for improvement.

SUPPORTING POSITIVE INTERACTIONS

Spaces fully implementing this practice attend to the role of relationships and personal interaction within the space. Specifically, the spaces have policy, practice, or physical characteristics that allow for optimal interaction between caregivers (either parents/guardians or staff) and children as well as peer-to-peer interactions among children.

KEY EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS:

- **Developing healthy, warm, trusting relationships with caregivers**
- **Communication**
- **Self-regulation**
- **Promoting positive peer relationships**
- **Exploring/experimenting**

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Permanent installations/features are tiered in size to allow caregivers to easily observe, interact, and play with children in the space.
- Graphic and written signage within the space clearly indicates the types of activities or materials available and provides suggestions for developmentally appropriate interactions.
- Space is well-maintained and in good repair in order to support the space as 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 in order to support caregiver’s overall engagement and comfort in using 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).
- Environments of the space allow for or reflect children’s “design sense” or perspective – it may not look like what an adult would create.
- Organization provides multiple sets of materials with each activity or program in order to allow for more than one user at a time and to support social connectivity with users (child-child, child-caregiver, child-parent/guardian).

PEOPLE

- Staff members understand how to prompt caregivers for intervention in response to children’s needs by framing interventions as an invitation, or an opportunity to expand play activities.
- Staff and volunteers receive training and other supportive resources to consistently model appropriate, positive, and effective interactions within the space.
- Organization provides guidance to staff on what positive, developmentally appropriate interactions are within the context of the physical space design.
- Organization schedules regular time for staff to reflect on and share best practices and to share user feedback on the space with each other and management/leadership.

Use of Nature/Natural Elements

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

POLICY

- Organization policy supports the development of joint use agreements with public and private local green spaces (parks, playgrounds, undeveloped land, etc.).
- Organization policy supports local efforts incentivizing housing authorities, landlords, and businesses to provide or improve natural space elements within their community.
- Organization policy includes a parent/guardian-teacher-staff communication plan (including but not limited to online methods) outlining their importance and providing opportunities to use the nature/natural elements of the space.
- Organization maintains a plan specific to the care and management of natural elements (plants, trees, etc.) within the space.
- Organization policy supports the use of plants that are child friendly, native to the local area, and promote interaction with local/native wildlife (e.g., birds, insects, etc.).

PRACTICE

- Organization practices include outdoor programming integrated with healthy eating practices.
- Organization practices support scheduled time in outdoor environments on a regular basis for children using the space.
- Space activities are supported by guides/materials (listening guides, handouts, etc.) with suggestions for optimal use and varied ways to connect to the environment.
- Space activities include opportunities to learn about and/or model environmental stewardship and sustainability practices.
- Organization practices encourage the use and sharing of food grown on-site by space users and staff.
- Space activities are designed to 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 in order 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.

USE OF NATURE/ NATURAL ELEMENTS

Spaces fully implementing this practice incorporate nature and/or natural elements including the use of green space, gardening features, outdoor unstructured play, natural un-designed areas, natural shade, and fixed features that incorporate access to, or views of, natural spaces.

KEY EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS:

- Exploring and experimenting
- Self-regulation
- Family and peer relationships
- Communication
- Self-esteem
- Coping
- Mastery and challenge
- Appropriate risk taking

- 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

- Organization provides continuing education opportunities for staff/volunteers regarding the benefits of nature for children's development as well as how to use natural elements within the space.
- Organization actively seeks out and engages local experts to provide training and support to optimize use of natural elements within the space.

Diversity of Space and Activities

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

POLICY

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

PRACTICE

- Organization regularly encourages and promotes linkage with local artists/artisans to provide décor and/or fixtures for the space to inspire children to work with various materials.
- Organization activities and programs highlight activity areas specific to the target audience and the developmental focus.
- Space activities utilize quick messaging (e.g., signage, takeaway materials, etc.) to promote diverse play within the space and to suggest options for tailoring the activity to children's interests.
- Space activities use familiar materials to encourage transfer to home environment.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Space includes a larger space with small sections/zones within the larger space for creative and/or restorative play.
- Space includes varied, multi-sensory experiences (e.g., music, art, water, soil, etc.) to encourage creative and diverse play experiences. There is intentional inclusion of children's art in the space.
- Space design is supportive of a room arrangement with a wide variety of age appropriate activities and loose parts for creative play.
- Space activities encourage the use of a variety of toys that address multiple ages and developmental abilities (wheeled, stationary, movable, creative play, etc.).
- Space planning includes the intentional inclusion of caregiver-focused areas/activities (e.g., seating areas, water fountains, shade) to increase intergenerational use of space.

DIVERSITY OF SPACE 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, styles of play, and developmentally appropriate processes/procedures. They include areas for group activities, individual play or respite.

KEY EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS:

- Exploring and experimenting
- Self-regulation
- Self-esteem
- Coping
- Mastery and challenge
- Positive peer and caregiver relationships

PEOPLE

- Organization provides training and resources to staff on how to mentor users for optional space use to promote appropriate caregiver-child interaction.
- Organization provides 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.
- Organization provides staff with training and resources to engage children and caregivers in space activities and provides options to caregivers for fun and engaging play.
- Organization supports staff through resources, policy, and procedures to allow children to initiate and develop play with found materials.

Safety and Support

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

POLICY

- Organization develops and establishes a safety plan for how staff can encourage, maintain, and support substantive, challenging, and safe play.
- Organization policy clearly outlines norms (including prohibited behaviors) for caring interactions among people in the space and with the space components.
- Organization creates and maintains 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.).
- Organization policy supports linkage to public transportation, including an on-site, clean, covered, and well-lit waiting area.
- Organization has a formalized crisis plan regarding emergencies that could arise in a space (e.g., medical/injury, weather, violence).
- Organization has policies for responsibility and liability in the space including staff/volunteer behavior with children, weapons, regulatory compliance (i.e., OSHA), child abuse prevention and reporting, unaccompanied adult users, etc.
- Organization policy includes a 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.
- Organization supports and encourages linkage with or creation of groups such as “neighborhood watch” to support safe use of space.
- Organization policy supports the use of community leaders to protect space (e.g., partner with police to reinforce safety messages).
- Staff and volunteers undergo background checks.

PRACTICE

- Organization uses “observation teams” that enter the space at designated times to observe families in use of the space and make recommendations for improvement related to safe use of space features.
- Space design and activities create purposeful structures, routines, and processes that help children manage their emotions and 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.

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.

KEY EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS:

- Exploring and experimenting
- Self-regulation
- Challenge

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.
- Space service features (water fountains, bathrooms, etc.) 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 (such as phone with 911 access) 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" spaces 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 members are educated about function and optimization of space characteristics (physical elements) with respect to supervision, engagement, and safety.
- Staff/volunteers serve as “mentors” within a space to demonstrate how to maximize supportive features that promote exploration of the space in an appropriate and safe fashion (examples include the Play Rangers program in the UK).
- Staff are trained and supported to effectively and confidently manage behavior including conflict between and among parents/guardians and children.
- Organization supports training of key staff in trauma-informed care and services.

Accessibility and Inclusiveness

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

POLICY

- Organization employs universal design principles with new space or the refurbishment of existing space to ensure physical accessibility of natural and built spaces.
- Organization develops and maintains a food allergy/sensitivity screening and protocol for addressing severe allergies (e.g., use of an “EpiPen”).
- Organization develops and maintains policies to facilitate engagement of people speaking multiple languages.
- Organization develops and maintains policies to engage children with physical, emotional, or sensory differences.
- Organization conducts an assessment of the composition and needs of the target community on a regular basis.
- Organization leadership interacts with and/or joins local networks serving similar populations.
- Organization policy promotes financial accessibility of the space (e.g., fee structure, collection of corporate or individual contributions to support users, etc.).
- Registration policies are sensitive to documentation concerns by users from immigrant communities.
- Organization conducts an accessibility review on a regular basis to ensure physical and cultural accessibility of all permanent fixtures.

PRACTICE

- Space activities and programming incorporate mentors from differing cultures and with different physical, social emotional, and cultural needs.
- Organization provides mobile services that bring services to children and families in target neighborhoods and communities.
- Space activities and programming create and use promotional materials that reflect the diversity of the target community.
- Organization creates feedback opportunities and systems to gather input from users and non-users of the space.
- Organization hosts events that are free and relate to the target community in order to maximize the impact of initial visits to the space.
- Organization promotes the incorporation of transportation costs, schedules, routes, etc. into activity planning within the space.
- Organization strives to communicate aspects of the space (accessibility, cost, documentation) to families before they enter the space to improve understanding and preparation for optimal use of the space.
- Organization encourages the creation of support groups and play groups for parents/guardians with a potential affinity to each other such as not working outside of home and non-English speaking).

ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVENESS

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 physical, social emotional and cultural needs as well as planning for how particular physical elements, program, and activities within a space adapt for users of varying abilities.

KEY EARLY CHILDHOOD MENTAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS:

- Exploring and experimenting
- Self-regulation
- Self-esteem

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 in surfaces and textures creates zones, edges, and approaches, which help improve circulation through the space for people with sensory impairments.
- Space incorporates flexible and moveable design that 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 into a site 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.
- Space includes features aimed at physical development (climbing/balancing elements) and sensory input and experiences (tactile/textures, sound, etc.).
- Play areas are linked to the space’s main circulation paths and to each other by accessible routes.
- Paths within the space 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.
- Signage is in multiple languages or uses symbols to explain use or access.
- Translators or interpreters are available for events on an as-needed basis.
- Spaces provide sensory experiences for varied needs including for children with sensory sensitivity.
- Child and adult changing rooms and gender-neutral bathrooms and/or family restrooms 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.

Sustainability

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGIES

POLICY

- Organization policy allows for purposeful integration of parent/guardians and children in the design of the space.
- Collects, analyzes, and shares utilization and behavior mapping (observation) data for space (e.g., number of persons using space per day/week/month).
- Conducts periodic family friendly user surveys regarding accessibility (logistical and developmental) of the space and ideas for improvement (users and non-users).
- Creates a local advisory committee including adults and youth to support space sustainability through ongoing attention to community needs, priorities, and feedback.
- Hires staff from the community.
- Collaborates with multiple stakeholders across the community to increase buy-in and leverage other resources.
- Creates a collective impact statement that links implementation to long-term outcomes and cost savings with community reinvestment for high-risk populations.
- Integrates and/or links to other services within the community (e.g., free access for children in area crisis centers).
- Vision of space design and implementation is flexible and there is ongoing outreach to team for ideas/inspiration.
- Creates opportunities for smaller organizations to access technical assistance, expertise, and policies from other larger organizations and partnerships.
- Creates shared training opportunities with similar spaces in the community.

PRACTICE

- Recruitment and hiring practices support selection of staff with fundamental knowledge of child development and an understanding of the role of space and environment in supporting optimal child development.
- Provide regular in-service trainings to staff to support new space features and/or areas of improvement modeling for parents/guardians and parent/guardian training.
- Provide staff with available linkages/access to other services in the community including local transportation, libraries, etc.
- Accommodate the schedule needs of both school-aged and younger children and their families (focus, time, etc.).
- Community members are partners in design, use, evaluation, shared space, and programs.
- Programs and events encourage walking access.

SUSTAINABILITY

Effective implementation of best practice indicators requires the intentional and thorough planning for sustainability from the beginning of the design process. Key drivers of sustainability are the availability of funding (budget planning and funding for start-up and maintenance), access (convenience, transportation, scheduling), reach (number and types of children and families who can use the space), staff capacity and human resources, and utilization (number of children who actually use the space or areas within the space).

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

- Use of "slow build" process to support iterative change within the space and to ensure space features meet current community needs.
- Use comprehensive long-range maintenance.
- Use repurposed materials when appropriate/available.

PEOPLE

- Staff is supported to provide parent/guardian engagement training to transfer activities/space ideas to home environments.
- Staff recognizes the continuum of consumer engagement (always offered but not required).
- Supports the creation of a collaborative network within the "community of practice" including influential decision makers.