



Code of Practice for Rights-Based Pedagogies in Early Childhood

9th May 2023
Hajdúböszörmény

Written by:

Prime Investigators of the project:

Dr Eleonora Teszenyi (The Open University)

Dr Sándor Pálfi (University of Debrecen)

Dr Natalie Canning (The Open University)

Co-Investigators:

Dr. Imre Fenyő

Dr. Balázs Molnár

Dr. Nóra Veronika Németh

Dr. Dávid Rábai

D Anikó Nagy Varga

Written based on the findings of a collaborative project between the Faculty of Education for Children and Special Educational Needs at the University of Debrecen, Hungary and the School of Education, Childhood, Youth and Sport at The Open University UK with contributions from Early Childhood professionals and kindergarten pedagogues:

Balogh Beáta

Pálfi Pálma

Bőjtös Nikoletta

Papné Gyöngyösi Katalin

Demcsákné Lorger Tímea

Papné Pintér Csilla

Dobiné Besenyei Andrea

Pur Mihály

Félegyháziné Kathi Ildikó

Rhédi Anna

Kovácsné Dr Bata Éva

Skarbit Józsefné

Kövérné Toldi Zita

Szántóné Papp Judit

Krajecz Amarilla

Szóllósi Tamás

Leleszné Sveda Klára

Szűcs Lászlóné

Mányiné Czine Helga

Tárkányiné Buda Éva

Contents

01	Introduction	pg 01
02	The Play of Freedom	pg 03
03	The Environment	pg 04
04	Children's Voice	pg 05
05	Children's Autonomy	pg 06
06	Essentials for Life and Well-Being	pg 07
07	Significant People	pg 08
08	Practitioner Notes	pg 10

Introduction

This Code of Practice addresses the various professionals of Early Childhood in order to offer guidance and pedagogic steer for Early Years practice. Underpinned by empirical evidence, it offers support for practitioners to develop and reinforce dispositions and attitudes essential for practice underpinned by child-centred and child-respecting pedagogies. We anticipate that the foundational principles laid out in this document will further evolve as our thinking extends to areas of practice that has not been considered so far.

What are the aims of this Code of Practice?

Although child-centredness is at the heart of the National Core Programme for Kindergarten Education (it states that Hungarian kindergartens are inclusive and child-centred) simply loving children does not seem to guarantee respect for children's rights. This Code of Practice fills the gap in practitioner guidance for rights-respecting approaches. What is in this Code is drawn from our research examining children's everyday lives, expressed conceptually in language that is understood by professionals working in the field.

Who is it for?

The Code of Practice is for practitioners, leaders and managers of settings and Early Years professionals, whose main concern is children's well-being, recognising children as agentic and experts in their own lives, who are capable of influencing the lives of those around them. In this Code of Practice, we bring into focus respect for children's rights and an attentive listening approach that helps us engage with their perspectives.

What are the key concepts in this document that require an explanation?

Children's voice – children express their ideas and send out messages through the way they live their lives, the way they talk or act and through their relationships. This requires adults to listen closely to children in order to decipher their meaning.

Children's rights – This Code of Practice offers an interpretation of children's rights through pedagogic practice, that goes beyond the legal processes of protection. Children's rights are already declared by the laws and legislations of child protection and safeguarding. What the Code of Practice addresses here is those everyday care and education practices that take children seriously and respect children's rights through a listening approach. The rights enshrined in the articles of The United Nations Convention on

the Rights of the Child can be divided into three groups:

1. Protection
2. Provision
3. Participation.

Children's rights to protection and provision are perhaps more easily understood in pedagogic practice. However, the right to participate needs some explaining. Realizing children's participation rights requires adults to view children as agentic who are able to influence their own lives as well as the lives of others, therefore, they are seen as significant in their own settings and communities.

Socio-cultural underpinning – In this Code of Practice nurturing children is understood as the processes of practitioners' participation in and collaboration with the child's family and communities. From a socio-cultural perspective, children are considered more than passive recipients of the teaching and learning processes; they are seen as active agents influencing and contributing to the lives of those around them as they establish and pass on ways of living together, in other words, cultures.

Adult dominance – Early years practitioners and professionals involved in the child's care and education share legally bound professional responsibilities for each child in their care. Therefore, adults play a central role in helping children exercise their rights. However, how this role is interpreted impacts significantly on children's lives. Children's experiences of adult dominance pivots on how adults balance their various roles connected to power. For this reason, in each of the six sections of this document, the dominant roles adults hold in helping children realise their rights in everyday situations are explained in detail. The explanation of these roles can serve as starting points for reflection and self-evaluation of practitioners' own practice.



How is this document structured?

It has six sections: 'Children's Play of Freedom', 'The Role of the Environment', 'Children's Voice', 'Children's Autonomy', 'Significant People' and finally 'Essentials for Life and Well-being'. Each section begins with an introduction of the umbrella concepts drawn from the ideas that children told us are important to them in their everyday lives. We are fully aware of the overlaps between the concepts discussed in the six sections, therefore, for clarity and to avoid repetition, they are discussed in one place only.

The concepts explained in the subsequent sections are drawn from two sources:

1. The research project entitled „It's So Good Just To Be!“ kutatás which explores children's rights in pedagogic practice in Hungary (2020–2022)
2. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its articles (UN, 1989)

There is also guidance provided in each section for child-respecting pedagogic practices relating to the concept discussed within it. These are listed under the heading of 'How can practitioners support children?' The last pages are left blank for practitioners' notes and reflections.

The Play of Freedom

Participation rights group

Children's lived experiences of play are important and unique to each child. A child can experience the same activity but feel different things or place more importance on one aspect than on the other. This links to uniqueness of personality and having the opportunity to follow their own interests. Children's own microcosms come together in their shared play, in which they concentrate on their own activities with maximum energies.

Children come to understand the world through the language of play. Play is the most visible expression of children's thinking and free play provides unique opportunities for children to represent their ideas. Freedom is when children can interpret the world around them in their play as they see it from their own perspective. From this viewpoint will they find other children's play interesting and attractive. When joining with others, they create play worlds together.

The way children demonstrate freedom in their play is in small, potentially insignificant ways. It is not about the physical possession of something, but the way in which children are confident enough to know that they can gain something from sharing their play with others, without taking anything away from the play situation and being comfortable with the fact that the play might change and develop, but it will still involve and stimulate their interest and thinking. Directing their own play is essential to children's play of freedom, which includes children themselves planning and organising their play.

How can the practitioner support children?

- Believe and accept that children can make decisions about how they plan their play, what direction it takes and what its goals are.
- Provide opportunities for children to follow their own interests.
- Provide the time and space that children's play requires, make it possible for children to wallow in their play.
- Be curious about what children are showing you (interest, curiosity, fear, experience ... etc.)
- Follow the child's lead, learn from them, understand their play plan, and help them carry it out.
- Understand that when children have freedom in their play, they will be socially open to experiences.



The Environment

Provision rights group

The environment provides a context and boundaries for what is happening when children talk and play with ideas. For children, physical spaces can contain non-directive equipment and resources where children control their play and where the flexibility in the environment stimulates their imagination and creativity. Children's fascination with collecting objects enhances the resources available and enriches their play spaces. Different textures and sizes of material, which do not envisage an end-product and relies on the inspiration and imagination of the child, are important so that children's expression of themselves and what is important to them can be recognised.

An individually tailored emotional environment can help children deal with and understand difficult aspects of their lives or specific instances which have happened. The environment as an important space and place influences the way children interact, express themselves and trust what they are feeling. The environment should be a safe space, where children feel connected and feel that they have contributed to how the space is presented and maintained.

Establishing an environment (both indoors and out) that the child sees as aesthetically pleasing is important because by helping to care for the play spaces around them, children develop strong bonds not only with the physical but also with the social and emotional environment of the setting. Child-centred social environments accommodate children's parallel activities, where they develop their own social identities by drawing on their own and their peers' experiences. For this to happen, children have the need to be able to move around freely, transition seamlessly from one play space to the other, from one group to the other with peers or on their own.

How can the practitioner support children?

- Help children incorporate materials and resources into their play that connect with children's play plans.
- Find out about and respect children's preferences for certain materials and ensure their availability in the setting.
- Accept that children use resources for varied purposes in their play.
- Learn about children's own socio-cultural contexts and make connections to them in the setting.
- Support establishing social an emotional environment that is built on trust.
- Embed children's diverse cultural capital into the environment and respect their home ways appearing in the setting.
- Seek to understand children's ideas of beauty in the environment and find ways to represent them in the setting's environment.
- Show understanding as you reflect children's emotional responses back to them and help them make sense of it.



Children's Voice

Provision and Participation rights groups

Children have an innate drive to find out about and understand about the world around them and the people in it. This is fuelled or hindered by the emotional environment. Children either allow others into their own personal worlds or deliberately keep them out depending on what they feel is safe. Children express themselves to enable play to evolve, be negotiated and contain a certain amount of compromise so that everyone involved achieves a sense of satisfaction. The 'hundred languages' of children lays the foundations for recognizing diversity and uniqueness, which support harmonious and democratic relationships to develop.

Children's participatory rights realise in having their voices heard. Children's views and their agency influence their everyday lives in their settings. Patient and sensitive adults create a supportive social-emotional environment, where children can recognise that their diverse contributions can help find solutions that are acceptable for everyone. Experimenting with self-expression enables children to experience and build social relationships, be involved in play, have ideas affirmed or ignored, and build capacity to be adaptable and flexible in a play situation. In this way, they develop an understanding of what is ethically acceptable or unethical.

How can the practitioner support children?

- Establish a climate of acceptance where children can freely respond to the impulses, changes and stimuli in their worlds.
- Recognise that children's views could be the reflection of their and others' lives (opinion, desire, observations) in their self-organised play, drawings, songs & dance, creations and other modes of expression.
- Allow children's voices (expressed views) to inform your planning in order to respond to children's everyday experiences.
- Recognise children's unique ways of expressing themselves.
- What children say comes from within. Seek, together with the child, the most appropriate forms of self-expression and weave children's views into your activity plans.



Children's Autonomy

Protection and Participation rights groups

Children's autonomy is intertwined with the other themes and central to children having a sense of control over what they are engaged in doing. Children demonstrate their autonomy through using resources in flexible ways, initiating and building on their ideas and demonstrating interest and courage through concentration and engagement. They share their understanding with other children through conversation, disagreement, expressing a point of view, or directing others. They may also take risks (either physical or emotional) and gain confidence from the children around them, with whom they find solutions to their problems, share the joy of success or, indeed, the disappointment of failure. In demonstrating their confidence to other children, they often become leaders of the play, being able to influence other children into copying their actions and behaviour.

Play interactions that children encounter in social group play help them to practice and develop their understanding of the patterns and processes that underpin social relationships and friendship. Children's autonomy and power is subsequently sustained through relationships, dialogue and negotiation. For children, these processes feature strongly in social play, which allows children to experience empowerment through taking responsibility and investing emotionally. Making various perspectives visible to children help develop skills that deal with power hierarchies constructively.

How can the practitioner support children?

- Talk with children regularly about what matters they can make decisions in, specially in matters that affect their own and the group's lives.
- Take children's autonomy into consideration when establishing codes of conduct and ways of being/working together within the group.
- Help children recognise their own limitations as you tune into children's play and help them in finding resolutions.
- Facilitate the processes of children's decision making.
- Help children develop dispositions and attitudes that support their autonomy (expressing views, putting across an argument, questioning, critical thinking...etc.).
- Make space for children's explorations through which they construct new understandings.



Essentials for Life and Well-Being

Protection and Provision rights groups

Children's interpretation of essentials for life is woven into the everyday, often prompted by what is happening at the time. How essential needs for them to survive and be healthy are met influence the fulfilment of all other needs. Children develop their own sensitivities to danger or threat, comfort and safety, so they can recognize these situations in their everyday lives.

How children think of well-being is complex with many layers of meaning. They are attuned to threats to their well-being, such as anxiety, exclusion, tension, unpredictability or the emotional climate of their environment. For them a key element of well-being is health and healthy living, which children are also acutely aware of. They see health itself as a positive concept, however, their own relationship to health and healthy lifestyles strongly depends on their relationship with people who are important to them. Their own ideas are based on the cultural context of their upbringing. Children have a strong desire to have a sense of well-being, however, expressing is often difficult and might happen in spaces invisible to adults.

How can the practitioner support children?

- Handle confidential information relating to children's health and wellbeing discreetly.
- Interpret children's individual, unique and constantly changing needs in a nuanced way.
- Show and interest in and enquire about children's worries and concerns, and offer your sensitive support when they are unsure of themselves.
- Understand the conditions and circumstances that influence children's everyday needs (which could change with time).
- Provide the right conditions (intimacy and discretion) for children to be able to independently meet their own fundamental biological needs.
- Ensure that children have time for their activities and that they are able to do them at their own pace.



Significant People

Protection and Participation rights groups

Children may have lots of interesting and important people in their lives, but only those who are significant have a strong influence in their lives. They are primary and secondary attachment figures (parents, grandparents, family members), professionals or people chosen by children as significant, who can be both children or adults. Significant people in children's lives foster children's socialisation, participation, and engagement in everyday activities so these skills are practiced in the setting through their relationships as they develop attitudes towards others.

Children unavoidably bring into the setting the patterns of home life, home ways of living and the relationship hierarchies they experience at home. This informs the child's responses (rejection or acceptance) to stimuli in the setting. Relationships with significant people enjoy priority over others in children's play and activities. The relationships that children form with other children through friendship develop across a variety of contexts and contribute to the experiences children encounter. Socially attuned relationships could be euphoric for children, which can develop their preference for friendships or, indeed, make their friends as a point of reference in their relationships. Children's interactions in social play situations are integral in understanding the process of how children express their feelings and preferences and how they learn to understand themselves, leading to how they interpret their rights.


How can the practitioner support children?

- Find out about and unconditionally accept children's relationships with people significant to them. Recognise the positives in these relationships.
- Build on children's attraction to friendship relationships and harness the opportunities they offer.
- Respect children's decisions about who their friends are and support them in establishing positive relationships with friends.
- Use your holistic understanding of children to their advantage (utilise all the valuable information gained about children's lives outside the setting).





Practitioner Notes



A large, light blue rounded rectangle occupies the central portion of the page. It contains 25 horizontal lines, evenly spaced, intended for practitioners to write their notes. The lines are thin and dark, providing a guide for text entry.



A large, light blue rounded rectangle occupies the majority of the page. It contains 25 horizontal lines, evenly spaced, intended for handwritten notes or reflections. The lines are thin and dark, contrasting with the light blue background.



A large, light blue rounded rectangle occupies the majority of the page, serving as a writing area. It contains 25 horizontal lines spaced evenly down its length. The top right corner of this rectangle is rounded. The background of the page is white, and the bottom right corner features a dark blue curved shape.

