AECEA

Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta

2026 ESSENTIAL PIECES CONFERENCE

Threads of Belonging

Identity

Leadership

Community

VIRTUAL CONFERENCE

MAY 22 - 23, 2026

AECEA.CA/2026-CONFERENCE

WELCOME MESSAGE FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Welcome to AECEA's 2026 Essential Pieces Virtual Conference, Threads of Belonging: Weaving Identity, Leadership & Community.

As we gather from across Alberta and beyond, we are reminded that belonging is not something we arrive at, but something we create together through relationships, shared experiences, and the ways we show up for one another. Early learning and child care is grounded in community, shaped by identity, and strengthened through the everyday leadership of early childhood educators.

Whether you are just beginning your journey or have been walking this path for years, I want to acknowledge the important role you play in the lives of children, families, and communities. The work you do is essential—supporting children's development, fostering connection and well-being, and laying the foundation for lifelong learning.

At AECEA, we are proud to stand alongside you. Our work continues to focus on strengthening the early childhood educator profession by amplifying your voices and advocating for the recognition, support, and conditions needed for educators to thrive. We believe in a future where early childhood educators are respected as professionals, well-supported in their work, and recognized for the critical role they play in early learning and child care.

This year's conference is both a reflection and an invitation. A reflection on how identity, leadership, and community shape our practice, and an invitation to consider how we continue weaving belonging into the spaces we create with children, families, and one another. It is an opportunity to learn from diverse perspectives, deepen our understanding, and strengthen our collective voice.

As you engage in this conference, I invite you to reflect, connect, and be inspired. Let's continue working together to build a strong, inclusive, and responsive early learning and child care system in Alberta.

With gratitude,
Mary-Frances Smith
Executive Director, AECEA

2026 AECEA ESSENTIAL PIECES CONFERENCE

Welcome to AECEA's 2026 Essential Pieces Conference. This year's theme, *Threads of Belonging: Weaving Identity, Leadership & Community*, invites us to reflect on how belonging is created through relationships, identity, and shared responsibility. Across Alberta and beyond, early childhood educators, leaders, researchers, and community partners are building environments where children, families, and educators feel seen, valued, and connected.

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SESSION INFORMATION

All sessions will be recorded, and you will have 90 days following the conference to watch the recordings.

Certificates of attendance will only be provided to those who attend sessions live, stay for the entirety of the sessions, and have completed a reflection form following the conference's end.

As you navigate through the many enriching sessions, we've made it easy to find the ones that best suit your interests and professional goals. Below, you'll find a breakdown of the key components for each session, ensuring that you can easily select the sessions that matter most to you.

SESSION THEMES

Each session will be based on one or more of the following themes:

- Leadership, Visions, and Change
- Advocacy, Identity, and the ECE Profession
- Inclusive and Responsive Practice
- Child Development, Well-Being, and Learning
- Play, Pedagogy, and Environments
- Educator Wellness and Sustainable Practice

TARGET AUDIENCE

To make it easier for you to identify sessions relevant to your role and professional needs, each session will specify its target audience(s), including:

- Educators;
- Administrators;
- Coaches or Mentors;
- Family Day Home Agencies;
- Leadership/Directors;
- Owner/Operators;
- Policymakers;
- Researchers;
- Inclusion Consultants

SESSION FORMAT

Each session is categorized by format, with a clear indication of whether it is an oral presentation, interactive workshop, keynote, or panel discussion.

SESSION STREAMS

Across two days, we will weave together the knowledge that lives in the community, the leadership that arises from everyday practice, and the identities that shape who we are as early childhood educators. From frontline stories to research insights, from community teachings to systemic reflections, the conference offers a shared space to imagine a future where ELCC in Alberta is rooted in belonging, equity, and strong professional identity.

Leadership, Vision + Change

Explore how ELCC leaders at every level, from classroom to community, can shape the future of the profession. Sessions in this stream might focus on leadership development, team dynamics, working with not-for-profit boards, implementing system changes, and creating shared visions and missions for programs.

Advocacy, Identity + the Profession

This stream strengthens the collective voice and professional identity of early childhood educators. It invites sessions that connect practice to policy, deepen understanding of advocacy, and explore how educators can influence public perception and system transformation.

Inclusive + Responsible Practice

Centring belonging, diversity, and equity, this stream focuses on inclusive strategies for supporting all children and families.

Child Development, Well-Being + Learning

Deepen your understanding of children's holistic development and the educator's role in supporting social-emotional growth, mental health, and resilience.

Play, Pedagogy + Environments

Celebrate the power of play as the foundation for learning and connection. This stream highlights playful pedagogies, creative curriculum design, and the role of environments — indoor and outdoor — as "the third teacher."

Educator Wellness + Sustainable Practice

A healthy workforce creates healthy learning environments. This stream focuses on supporting the well-being, balance, and professional growth of educators, whether working in centres, day homes, or leadership roles.

Alberta Early Learning and Care Leaders' Caucus (ALC) Co-Hosting Leaders Day at Essential Pieces Conference

We are excited to announce that the Alberta Early Learning and Care Leaders' Caucus will be co-hosting Leaders' Day at this year's Essential Pieces conference! May 22 will provide a dedicated space for early learning and child care leaders to connect, collaborate, and strengthen their leadership capacity. Through engaging sessions, thoughtful discussions, and networking opportunities, Leaders' Day will empower leaders to navigate challenges and drive positive change in Alberta's early learning and child care sector.

DAY 1 MAY 22

LEADERS' DAY

SHAPING SYSTEMS

9:00 AM - 9:15 AM	WELCOME
9:15 AM - 10:15 AM	KEYNOTE A
10:15 AM - 10:30 AM	BREAK
10:30 AM - 12:00 PM	BREAKOUT SESSIONS A
12:00 PM - 12:45 PM	LUNCH
12:45 PM - 1:45 PM	BREAKOUT SESSIONS B
1:45 PM - 2:00 PM	BREAK
2:00 PM - 3:00 PM	BREAKOUT SESSIONS C
3:00 PM - 3:15 PM	BREAK
3:15 PM - 4:15 PM	PANEL DISCUSSION
4:15 PM - 4:30 PM	CLOSING

DAY 2 MAY 23

EDUCATORS' DAY

SHAPING PRACTICE

9:00 AM - 9:15 AM	WELCOME
9:15 AM - 10:15 AM	KEYNOTE B
10:15 AM - 10:30 AM	BREAK
10:30 AM - 12:00 PM	BREAKOUT SESSIONS D
12:00 PM - 12:45 PM	LUNCH
12:45 PM - 1:45 PM	LOVE LETTERS TO PLAY
1:45 PM - 2:00 PM	BREAK
2:00 PM - 3:00 PM	BREAKOUT SESSIONS E
3:00 PM - 3:15 PM	CLOSING

9:15 AM - 10:15 AM

KEYNOTE A

TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY ADVOCATES - DEVELOPING COMMUNITY-BUILDING RESOURCES IN COLLABORATION

NOAH KENNEALLY, MADELINE KLEINFELD, BECCS STUDENTS

In October 2025, AECEA launched the Self-Advocacy Toolkit, a resource designed to support ECEs in communicating the importance of their work and advocating for themselves. Divided into 4 sections - foundational knowledge, everyday self-advocacy, and self-care, government communications, and supplementary materials - it is a wealth of research-based information and activities. The toolkit was developed by Mount Royal University Child Studies students and AECEA staff working in collaboration, and this partnership serves as the inspiration for our project.

While self-advocacy and engaging with government are essential ways to advance the sector, we have identified a middle ground that is also full of advocacy opportunities, "community-building." Child care centres are embedded in the communities around them, and these neighbours are potential allies and advocates for the field. This presentation will report on the processes and experiences of MacEwan University Early Learning and Curriculum Studies faculty and students, and AECEA staff collaborating on developing community-building modules to supplement the Toolkit, creating tools to engage the members of our wider communities in working alongside educators, families, and children to advocate for the early learning sector.

As an aspect of the Bachelor of Early Childhood Curriculum Studies course Professional Practices: Ethics, Caring, and Social Activism, MacEwan students will design a suite of community-building activities, strategies, and resources. Drawing on the expertise and experience of Madeline Kleinfeld (AECEA), we hope this collaboration leads to the development of dynamic and engaging community-building resources for ECEs and early childhood communities across Alberta.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Preschool educators; Researchers

Advocacy, Identity + the Profession

10:30 AM - 12:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS A

SESSION A1
Interactive Workshop
(1.5 hours)

COLLABORATIVE CURRICULUM MAKING WITH TODDLERS AND THEIR LEARNING COMMUNITIES

DR. THERESE WIART JENKINSON

Belonging is a collaborative act. Drawing on current research from Alberta learning communities, this presentation shares how educators, toddlers and their families co-constructed meaningful learning through play. By honouring multiple ways of "knowing," including the lived experience of five early childhood educators and an academic researcher, we will explore how pedagogical documentation and pedagogical conversations created a sense of community and educational intentionality. This participatory session invites you to share your own stories of facilitating learning through play. Together, we will reflect on how meaning-making serves as a tool for equity, ensuring every toddler's voice and parent's voice is woven into the fabric of the curriculum.

Target Audience: Coaches or mentors; Facility-based educators; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Leadership/directors; Policymakers; Preschool educators; Researchers

Play, Pedagogy + Environments

SESSION A2
Interactive Workshop
(1.5 hours)

VALUES TO ACTION: GROUNDING PRACTICE WITH INTENTION

CATHY BELGRAVE

Values to Action invites educators to pause, reflect, and ground their professional practice in what matters most. In busy, outcome-driven systems, it's easy to act from habit, pressure, or expectation rather than from intention.

In this workshop, participants explore their professional values and notice how those values live in everyday moments with children, families, and colleagues. Through journaling, storytelling, and guided reflection, educators consider what they believe about children and learning, how they listen and respond, and where their actions already align - or feel out of step - with their intentions.

Rather than offering techniques, Values to Action creates space to think ethically and relationally about how we show up in learning environments. Participants leave with language to name what guides them, greater clarity about their practice, and a renewed sense of intention in their work alongside others.

Target Audience: Administrators; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home educators; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Preschool educators

Educator Wellness + Sustainable Practice

10:30 AM - 12:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS A CONTINUED

SESSION A3
Interactive Workshop
(1.5 hours)

EMPOWERING PERSONAL AND COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

SUE IRWIN & TAMMY DEWAR

Have you ever wondered how your day-to-day ECE practice could evolve looking through an ethical leadership perspective, and how embracing collective wisdom creates leadership communities? Do you want to define key leadership goals for yourself and identify tools to support you?

In the evolving landscape of early childhood education, the role of the educator and the complexities inherent within this role require a re-imagining of leadership for ourselves and colleagues. Leaning into codes of ethics and ECE frameworks is critical in transforming the leadership narratives we hold and model.

Being an educator encompasses being a leader, advocate, and mentor within our programs and the wider community. This workshop brings a perspective from the Early Childhood Educators of BC, supported by current program examples, and learnings from key initiatives that promote ECE voice and wisdom as catalysts for leadership identity.

Participants will engage in shared reflection, explore ethical and values-based tools, and unearth practical strategies to influence positive leadership change to strengthen their practice. Through interactive activities and collaborative discussions that honour multiple ways of knowing, you will walk away with ideas and strategies on how to foster a culture of belonging where our shared leadership journey can flourish and enhance everyday practice.
ECEBC is a proud affiliate partner of the AECEA.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Preschool educators

Leadership, Vision+Change

12:45 PM - 1:45 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS B

SESSION B1
Oral Presentation
(1 hour)

THE LIVING WALL IN ACTION
EMMIE HENDERSON-DEKORT & CAROLYN BJARTVEIT

This session explores a well-established approach to early childhood engagement, the living wall, examined through the lenses of participation, children's rights, and research methodology. It will presents a research endeavour conducted with preschool children as an example. By sharing the results and process of the research, participants in the session will see ways in which the living wall is used as a participatory tool to support children's active involvement as co-researchers. By adopting this approach, the session highlights ways in which research processes and findings can be meaningfully informed by children's perspectives and voices.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Preschool educators; Researchers

Advocacy, Identity + the Profession

SESSION B2
Interactive Workshop
(1 hour)

SMALL MOMENTS, BIG IMPACT: BUILDING ATTUNEMENT AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH CHILDREN
ERIN DAY & ERIN THOMAS

Strong relationships are fundamental to children's overall growth, development, and sense of belonging. Attunement, "the ability to be emotionally in sync with a child," lays the foundation for those relationships.

Join Erin Day (Occupational Therapist) and Erin Thomas (Program Coach) from Providence Inclusive Child Care to reflect on your relational practices and the connections you build with every child in your care. This interactive presentation weaves together evidence-based information, reflection questions, videos, and storytelling. It is designed to spark your curiosity and understanding about the link between strong relationships and children's learning and behaviours. The facilitators share stories that illustrate how emotional safety, built within strong relationships, reduces challenging behaviours. They also share practical classroom strategies to help you strengthen your relationships with all children in your early child care environment.

Target Audience: Administrators; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home educators; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Preschool educators

Inclusive + Responsible Practice

12:45 PM - 1:45 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS B CONTINUED

SESSION B3
Oral Presentation
(1 hour)

BEYOND SELF-CARE: WHY BURNOUT IS A COLLECTIVE ISSUE

MICHELLE BROWN

This session invites participants to move beyond individual, self-care focused narratives of burnout and toward a deeper understanding of burnout as a systemic, relational, and organizational issue. Grounded in the theme Threads of Belonging, the session explores how working conditions, professional identity, leadership practices, and a sense of belonging shape educator well-being in the early learning and child care (ELCC) sector.

Drawing on the presenter's doctoral research on educator burnout, alongside the work of leading scholars in the field, participants will examine evidence-based frameworks that shift responsibility from individuals to systems. The session integrates multiple ways of knowing, combining research findings, practitioner insights, and reflective practice rooted in lived experience.

Designed to be interactive and reflective, the session includes guided reflection and opportunities for participants to connect research findings to their own professional contexts. Participants will leave with a clearer understanding of burnout prevention as a shared responsibility, as well as concrete, research-informed strategies that can be applied at individual, team, and organizational levels. This timely session supports sustainable practice, inclusive leadership, and community care and contributes to ongoing professional learning across roles within the ELCC workforce.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Preschool educators; Researchers

Educator Wellness + Sustainable Practice

2:00 PM - 3:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS C

SESSION C1
Oral Presentation
(1 hour)

IDENTITY, VOICE, AND RIGHTS TO PARTICIPATION IN SPACES OF BELONGING

JENNIFER SIBBALD & SHAYLENE SAXTON

This presentation explores the many pathways to belonging in early learning communities by drawing on themes from the chapter Identity, Voice, and Human Rights to Participation in Spaces of Belonging from the upcoming book titled Learning with the Pedagogy of Reggio Emilia- Innovative Approaches to Early Childhood and Teacher Education, due for publication in April 2026. The ideas in the chapter speak deeply to the shared work of children, families, educators, and other adults in co-creating early childhood communities where each person's identity and voice are valued, and everyone experiences a strong sense of belonging in their early learning spaces.

Grounded in social constructivism and Reggio-inspired approaches, the presentation will highlight belonging not as a static outcome but as an ongoing process shaped by culture, identity, and relationships. The presenters will consider how our own identities and rights shape our sense of belonging. Participants will be invited to reflect on their own pathways to belonging; weaving together threads of educator rights, the complexity of inclusion, listening to children's voices, and cultivating connection.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Preschool educators

Inclusive + Responsible Practice

SESSION C2
Interactive Workshop
(1 hour)

ADDRESSING RACIAL AND MULTICULTURAL MICROAGGRESSIONS FOR INCLUSIVE/HEALTHY ECE WORKPLACES

LOBNA AJAINI

Led by Lobna Ajaini, this workshop helps educators recognize and address racial and cultural microaggressions and understand their impact on mental health. Through engaging activities, reflective discussions, and real-life examples, participants explore strategies to create supportive, inclusive, and mentally healthy ECE workplaces. Educators gain practical tools to respond confidently to microaggressions, foster emotional resilience, and cultivate environments where both staff and children can thrive in equity, care, and respect.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Preschool educators

Educator Wellness + Sustainable Practice

2:00 PM - 3:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS C CONTINUED

SESSION C3
Interactive Workshop
(1 hour)

HUMANIZING AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: CREATING BRAVE SPACES FOR EQUITY & BELONGING

MAHA ABBAS

This session invites early years professionals to explore how reflection, vulnerability, and relational safety build true inclusion. Participants will co-create Brave Space Agreements that welcome discomfort, imperfection, and growth, while reflecting on their personal role in advancing equity and belonging. Through guided dialogue, educators will learn to reframe fear and mistakes as opportunities for connection and understanding, and explore ways to structure reflective meetings where all voices are valued and heard.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Preschool educators; Researchers

Advocacy, Identity + the Profession

3:15 PM - 4:15 PM

PANEL DISCUSSION

CURRENT STATE OF ADVOCACY IN ALBERTA: HAVE WE MOVED THE NEEDLE?

LEA BLUST (ALC), CHERYL CROWTHER (AFCCA), SUSAN GARROW-OLIVER, CODY TOPP (SACDA), NICKI DUBLENKO

Over the past decade, advocacy in Alberta's early learning and child care sector has grown in visibility, coordination, and urgency. But what has truly changed—and for whom? This panel brings together voices from across the sector to reflect on the real impact of advocacy efforts. Moving beyond high-level policy conversations, panelists will explore what progress looks like on the ground for early childhood educators and programs, where momentum has been gained, and where gaps persist. Together, we will consider the voices shaping advocacy today and what "moving the needle" actually means. This conversation will also look ahead—identifying the shifts needed to ensure advocacy efforts lead to meaningful, sustained change for Alberta's ELCC workforce.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Preschool educators; Researchers

Advocacy, Identity + the Profession

9:15 AM - 10:15 AM

KEYNOTE B

GUIDING PRINCIPLES FOR ETHICAL PRACTICE IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ALBERTA

MADELINE KLEINFELD

This session introduces AECEA's Guiding Principles for Ethical Practice in Early Childhood Education in Alberta—a resource shaped through extensive engagement with educators, students, leaders, and partners across the province.

Participants will be taken behind the scenes of the development process, exploring the values, frameworks, and voices that informed the work. The session will offer an overview of the final document and its structure, while highlighting how the principles are intended to support reflection, dialogue, and professional learning in everyday practice.

The keynote will also introduce Living the Principles, an ongoing initiative that invites educators to share real moments from practice that bring the principles to life. Together, this work recognizes ethical practice as something we continually navigate within relationships, community, and the evolving context of our profession.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Preschool educators; Researchers

Advocacy, Identity * the Profession

Guiding Principles
for Ethical Practice in ECE

Living the Principles
Real Experiences in ECE

10:30 AM - 12:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS D

SESSION D1
Interactive Workshop
(1.5 hours)

LET'S GO OUTSIDE! PROMOTING AND SUPPORTING OUTDOOR PLAY

CINDY CURRY

There is a belief that real learning for children happens inside, usually at a table or sitting cross-legged, passively listening to an adult. It is believed that time spent outside only has value in providing children with an opportunity to ˜blow off steam.'

It's time to bust this myth! We need to be able to identify all the learning that happens naturally when children are outdoors. Through this, we begin to value outdoor experiences and then loudly and confidently advocate for outdoor play. As we unpack our own concerns and challenges about spending time outside, including weather and risky play, we can begin to overcome our apprehension and plan our days around spending large amounts of time outdoors.

Target Audience: Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Preschool educators

Play, Pedagogy + Environments

CO-CREATING INFANT AND TODDLER COMMUNITIES

JODY MERRICK & KATELYN WOMBOLD

SESSION D2
Oral Presentation
(1.5 hours)

In this session, we will explore how intentional relationships, inclusive practices, and collaborative documentation can shape vibrant infant and toddler communities. Participants will learn practical strategies for fostering a sense of belonging through learning stories, the Living Wall model, and family-engaged projects that honour each child's identity and experiences.

We will share examples of how educators and families can co-create environments where our youngest citizens feel seen, valued, and connected. Attendees will leave with actionable ideas to strengthen relationships, enhance pedagogical documentation, and build inclusive, nurturing early learning communities.

Target Audience: Coaches or mentors; Facility-based educators; Family day home educators; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Researchers

Inclusive + Responsible Practice

10:30 AM - 12:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS D CONTINUED

SESSION D3
Interactive Workshop
(1.5 hours)

FROM ADAPTATION TO EMPOWERMENT: CREATING INCLUSIVE SPACES FOR EVERY CHILD

DR. AFRA FOROUD

Imagine a learning environment where every child is empowered to flourish emotionally, cognitively, socially, physically, and spiritually. As educators, we strive to nurture the inner tools that allow children to thrive, yet this work begins with understanding ourselves. Where do we, as educators, fit on the neurodevelopmental spectrum? How does this shape our strengths and influence the way we support each child's growth?

This session invites you to explore the fascinating intersections of brain development, behaviour, and education. Drawing on current research in neuroscience and psychology, we will uncover how individual differences, including those often labelled as disorders, can be adaptive and valuable. Rather than viewing variation as a challenge to overcome, we reframe it as a source of strength that enriches learning communities.

Through interactive discussions and research-informed insights, you will learn how to recognize and celebrate diversity in developmental pathways. We will examine concepts such as sensitive periods, brain plasticity, affordance, and the dynamic relationship among movement, cognition, and sociality, key factors that influence how children acquire independence, self-regulation, resilience, including empathy and a community-forward perspective.

By the end of this session, you will have practical strategies to create inclusive environments that honour individuality, foster belonging, and support each child's unique potential for meaningful contributions to their environment and community as empowered agents of society. This is about adaptation, empowerment, and understanding the incredible spectrum of human development.

Target Audience: Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Policymakers; Preschool educators

Child Development · Well-Being + Learning

12:45 PM - 1:45 PM

LOVE LETTERS TO PLAY

ROBIN EGILSSON, ANNA KASPRICK, BRAHMLEEN KAUR & MANGLEVARY VISVANATHAN

What does it mean to truly honour play in early childhood education?

Love Letters to Play invites educators to pause, reflect, and reconnect with play as the heart of their practice.

In this session, Early Childhood Educators of Alberta share stories and insights from across the province, exploring play as a vital foundation for children's learning, well-being, and belonging.

Participants will consider how play shows up in their daily work, where it may be constrained, and how systems and expectations shape its possibilities. This session is both a celebration and a call to action: to protect play, advocate for its place in quality early learning and child care, and recognize the essential role educators hold in making play possible.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Preschool educators; Researchers

Play, Pedagogy + Environments

2:00 PM - 3:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS E

SESSION E1
Oral Presentation
(1 hour)

INCLUSIVE LEARNING FOR NEURODIVERGENT/DISABLED CHILDREN (FEATURING LITTLE RED READING HOUSE)

RAE MARTENS, PARISA RADMANESH & JESSICA-LYNN WALSH

In Alberta, 1 in 5 children is neurodivergent or has a learning disability. These children often face added barriers in school: for instance, 38% of children aged 5-11 with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) experience learning challenges, compared to 2.2% without ASD. Similarly, up to 50% of children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder struggle with reading and comprehension. As awareness of these disparities grows, so does the need for strength-based, inclusive approaches that support all learners.

This presentation will explore inclusive, evidence-based strategies to promote reading and literacy development for neurodivergent and disabled children. It will feature the Little Red Reading House (LRRH) with the Owerko Centre at the Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute, as an example of how research can be translated into meaningful community practice and spaces.

Located in Calgary, the LRRH is a welcoming, community-based literacy space where young children and their families can explore reading together, learn about early language and literacy development, and take home free books. Its approach is guided by evidence showing that children learn best when literacy experiences are joyful, engaging, and tailored to their individual needs. Creating environments that support psychological safety, sensory regulation, and genuine participation is especially important for neurodivergent and disabled learners.

In response to ongoing feedback from families, the LRRH is developing a dedicated sensory room designed to meet diverse sensory and learning needs. This thoughtfully designed space incorporates inclusive design principles and sensory-supportive tools to ensure that reading and learning skill-building are positive and accessible for every child.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Preschool educators; Researchers

Child Development, Well-Being + Learning

2:00 PM - 3:00 PM

BREAKOUT SESSIONS E CONTINUED

EXPLORING IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND POSSIBILITY: A PLAY-BASED INQUIRY

ROBIN EGILSSON & MIKAELA BEATTIE

SESSION E2
Interactive Workshop
(1 hour)

We will explore a long-term, play-based inquiry project centred around the question: What do you want to be when you grow up? Through children's interests, conversations, and lived experiences, this project evolved into an exploration of identity, community, occupations, and belonging. Participants will be invited into the documentation process, including learning stories, children's quotes, and provocations that supported the children's thinking. The presentation will highlight how community members, families, and virtual field trips were intentionally invited into the learning to deepen children's understanding of real-world roles and possibilities. Grounded in Alberta's FLIGHT framework, this session emphasizes children as capable, curious contributors and explores how educators can co-construct learning experiences that are inclusive, equitable, and responsive to diverse abilities and interests.

Target Audience: Administrators; Coaches or mentors; Educational assistants; Facility-based educators; Family day home agency staff; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Head start teachers; Inclusion consultants; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Policymakers; Preschool educators; Researchers

Play, Pedagogy + Environments

SESSION E3
Oral Presentation
(1 hour)

CREATING GENDER-INCLUSIVE EARLY CHILDHOOD SPACES: EDUCATOR STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSION

LISA PALMER

This session will discuss tangible strategies ECEs can use to create gender-inclusive spaces in their early childhood programs. The discussion will include the need for gender-inclusive spaces for young children based on current research, potential barriers to creating inclusive spaces, and strategies for overcoming these barriers. This session draws upon research completed by the speaker for their Master of Education thesis. The session will include opportunities for the audience to reflect on their current practices and examine ways to become more inclusive for all children, including those who are gender-diverse or come from gender-diverse families. The audience will gain a deeper understanding of the importance of gender-inclusive spaces and tangible strategies that can be implemented in their practice. There will also be a discussion of systemic change that is needed to create more inclusive spaces throughout the sector, which will be relevant to directors and post-secondary instructors. The session aligns with the conference theme of identity and belonging by supporting educators in feeling empowered to create spaces where children and families of any gender identity can belong. The session will blend a discussion of current research on gender-inclusion with practical strategies that can be implemented into daily practice, supporting educators in all facets of the ELCC profession by giving them tools to create gender-inclusive spaces within their programs.

Target Audience: Facility-based educators; Family day home consultants; Family day home educators; Leadership/directors; Out-of-school care educators; Owner/operators; Preschool educators; Researchers

Inclusive + Responsible Practice

Maha Abbas is a RECE with over a decade of experience across the ECE sector, supporting children, families, and educators in diverse learning and community settings. She currently works in a curriculum leadership role, supporting large-scale early learning programs through coaching, reflective practice, and professional learning. Maha is pursuing a Master of Arts in ECE with a focus on anti-racism, culturally responsive pedagogy, and belonging. As an ECC Coach and Presenter with The Early Childhood Coach, Maha brings a deeply relational, justice-centred approach to her work, creating learning spaces where educators feel seen, valued, and empowered to lead with courage and care.

Day 1 • Session C3

Lobna Ajaini is an Ontario ECE college professor and founder of Childhood Empowerment, a platform fostering creativity, leadership, care, and intersectionality in early childhood education. With a Bachelor of Engineering, Master of Professional Education (MPED) in ECE, Honours Bachelor in Early Childhood Leadership (HBECL), and RECE diploma, she combines technical problem-solving with imaginative pedagogy. Passionate about Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging (EDIB), Lobna designs workshops and curricula that empower educators to co-create inclusive, creative, and meaningful learning experiences for children and families. She has held diverse ECE and adult education roles and earned multiple awards for her contributions.

Day 1 • Session C2

Mikaela Beattie has been working with the Jasper Place organization for the past nine years. She also works as an educator in our preschool-aged classroom. And believes in learning alongside the children during their most meaningful moments of life. She enjoys celebrating their development, learning, and interests. She believes that play is an integral part of their childhood, and that connection plays a huge part in the relationships we form with the children, their families, and our colleagues.

Day 2 • Session E2

Cathy Belgrave is an Early Childhood and Elementary Educator, host of The Intentional ECE podcast, and founder of The Intentional Educator, a business dedicated to empowering educators in their practice. With a background in developmental psychology, a B.Ed., and Wunderled ECE certification, she has worked with children for over 25 years. Cathy weaves experience and inquiry to offer innovative approaches to curriculum, supporting teachers and leaders in revitalizing their practice with fresh perspectives. Her mission is to support leaders, ECE and elementary educators to bring authentic, consistent practices to learning environments that foster growth and thriving for all.

Day 1 • Session A2

Carolyn Bjartveit is coordinating the Bachelor of Child Studies, Early Learning and Child Care Program. Her teaching experience spans from pre-k to post-graduate levels in Early Childhood Education (ECE). Carolyn's teaching and research examines how historical, philosophical, and cultural perspectives shape early years learning and education. Her areas of research include the history and philosophy of ECE, cultural and curriculum studies, inclusive practice, and child-activism through the visual arts (artivism). Through her work, Carolyn explores how creative and inclusive pedagogies can foster equitable and meaningful learning experiences for young children. Carolyn collaborates with educators and community partners to bridge research and practice to the field of Early Childhood Education.

Day 1 • Session B2

Lea Blust, M.Ed., is a Program Chair and Instructor at Bow Valley College in the Early Childhood Education and Development Department. After 12 years of working with young children with various abilities and from backgrounds of risk and trauma, Lea began teaching with Bow Valley College, with particular interests in inclusion and children's rights. As an instructor, Lea is passionate about ensuring accessible and meaningful education for early childhood educators in order to build a quality ELCC workforce. Lea is also a Board Member for the Canadian Child Care Federation. This advocacy work provides a broad lens on research and system-building in the early learning and child care sector, both for Alberta and across Canada.

Day 1 • Leaders Panel

Michelle Brown is an educator and researcher

whose work focuses on teacher burnout and the conditions that support sustainable practice in education. She is currently pursuing a PhD in Education, with research examining burnout through individual and systemic lenses. She has eight years of experience as a school teacher and, since 2023, has taught in early childhood education as a post-secondary instructor. She is actively developing a double accreditation in early childhood education, along with a micro-certificate in early childhood education centre management. Her work bridges research, practice, and professional learning, with a strong emphasis on belonging, leadership, and community care.

Day 1 • Session B3

Cindy Curry loves learning, sharing her passion for play and is energized when she can inspire others along the way. She has dedicated over 37 years to Early Childhood Education and has worked in many types of programs, including group family child care and forest and nature school. Currently, she is an Instructor at University College of the North in The Pas, Manitoba, facilitates workshops, and advocates for children playing outside and connecting with nature.

Day 2 • Session D2

Cheryl Crowther is the Director at Child Development Dayhomes Calgary. With 30 years in the Family Childcare Sector, Cheryl is a passionate advocate and influential mentor in the dayhome community. From her work at the local, provincial and national levels, her mission has always been clear: elevating childcare excellence for every family.

Day 1 • Leaders Panel

Erin Day is an Occupational Therapist with the Providence Inclusive Child Care Team. She partners with early childhood educators to support regulation, connection, and inclusion in early learning environments. Erin brings a practical, compassionate approach to understanding children's behaviour and supporting the adults who care for them, with a strong belief that small shifts can make a meaningful difference in classrooms.

Day 1 • Session B2

Nicki Dublenko is a member of the AECEA policy committee and a past board chair. She has a Master of Education degree in early learning and care, and sits on various committees, including the Council of Early Learning and Care and the "Educators Matter" National Workforce Policy Table. Nicki is the Executive Director of Child Development Dayhomes.

Day 1 • Leaders Panel

Tammy Dewar is the Program Manager of the Peer Mentoring Program with the Early Childhood Educators of BC, who resides on the unceded traditional territory of the Tseshaht and Hupacasath First Nations. An Early Childhood Educator with over 35 years of experience in the early years sector, she has provided extensive coaching, facilitation, and consultation to numerous community programs and provincial initiatives.

Tammy has direct experience with children and families, post-secondary and practicum instruction, and leading early years community development and collaborative groups. Her studies have focused on early childhood education, international coaching, community collaboration, social service, and advocacy. Tammy is known for heart-centred and relational approaches that cultivate conditions for collective growth, shared leadership, and educator well-being. She is deeply inspired by the wisdom, care, and ethical practice of educators.

Day 1 • Session A3

Robin Egilsson has been a part of the Jasper Place organization for five years. She is currently working as an educator in the preschool-aged classroom. She also works as an Alternate Director as well as an IPP Advocate within the organization. Robin has her diploma in early childhood education and has been working with children in some capacity for the majority of her life. She specializes in supporting children with exceptionalities and mentoring her colleagues.

Day 2 • Love Letters to Play
Day 2 • Session E2

Dr. Afra Foroud (she/her/elle) is a developmental neuroscientist and certified dance/movement educator. She serves as superintendent and behavioural specialist at Lethbridge Montessori School and teaches for Beyond Limits Dance

Collective, a program for all abilities. Afra is a faculty member at the Institute of Child and Youth Studies and adjunct professor in Psychology and Neuroscience at the University of Lethbridge. Her work bridges research and practice, exploring how brain development, movement, and social environments shape development, learning, and well-being. Afra is passionate about creating inclusive spaces that honour individuality and empower educators and children to thrive as contributors to the community.

Day 2 • Session D3

Dr. Susan Garrow-Oliver has been an educator, leader, and advocate in early learning and child care in Alberta for over 30 years. She works in post-secondary and adult education and is committed to supporting educators to lead with intention, engage in reflective practice, and navigate complex systems with confidence. Her work focuses on ELCC leadership and strengthening the professional identity of early childhood educators. Susan supports both emerging and experienced educators in creating positive change within the field.

Day 1 • Leaders Panel

Emmie Henderson-Dekort is an Assistant Professor in the Bachelor of Child Studies (BCST) degree program. Her research interests and expertise are centred on children and youth rights, participatory action research, and amplifying the voices of children. She is deeply committed to the principles outlined in the UNCRC and incorporates these into her teaching and research activities. Her work emphasizes the importance of educating both practitioners and young individuals about the UNCRC to ensure that children's rights are understood, respected, and implemented in various contexts.

Day 1 • Session B1

Sue Irwin is the Director of Programs and Operations for the Early Childhood Educators of BC and lives on the traditional lands of the Coast Salish Peoples. She brings 26 years of experience in the BC early years sector, including direct work with children, provincial program coordination, practicum instruction, leadership presentations, and ethics facilitation. Sue is known for empowering leadership, collective wisdom, and relationship-based ethical practice. Her education includes a diploma in ECCE with IT and SN specializations, a Brene Brown Leadership Certificate, and Child and Youth Care studies at UVic. Grounded in small-town roots, she values nature, family, and allyship.

Day 1 • Session A3

Anna Kasprick earned her diploma in Early Learning and Child Care from MacEwan University in 2013 and completed several courses in the Bachelor of Early Childhood Curriculum Studies program in 2020. Anna has experience working in playrooms with children aged three weeks to four years, mentoring co-educators as a curriculum facilitator, and guiding students through ECDV 0100: Exploring Early Childhood Curriculum as a course facilitator. Throughout her career, she has presented at several province-wide conferences and panels. Anna is passionate about advocating for children as citizens and strives to grow continuously as a professional.

Day 2 • Love Letters to Play

Brahmleen Kaur graduated from NorQuest College in 2022. Following that, she has gained over three years of experience working with young children and families. Brahmleen was featured in Alberta's Flight Video Tour Series (2023) and is an active researcher with a strong interest in literature, art, and education. She has presented her research in English in India (2019), at an international, cross-professional development forum in 2020, and at the AECEA Conference in 2025. Deeply passionate about equity and inclusion, Brahmleen is committed to supporting children and families from diverse backgrounds.

Day 2 • Love Letters to Play

Noah Kenneally, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Early Learning and Curriculum Studies at MacEwan University.

Day 1 • Keynote A

Madeline Kleinfeld is the Membership and Community Engagement Coordinator at AECEA.

She holds a Master's degree in Public Health and Social Policy, where she specialized in factors that influence children's well-being. Her academic background and direct work with children and families as an Education Assistant and Dance Instructor have contributed to her understanding of strong early foundations as a vital piece in shaping thriving communities. Passionate about supporting and empowering educators, she recognizes their essential contributions to this foundation. Through engagement, knowledge-sharing, and meaningful connections, she is dedicated to amplifying educators' voices and strengthening the ELCC sector.

Day 1 • Keynote A
Day 2 • Keynote B

Rae Martens is a Knowledge Broker and Research Engagement Strategist with the Azrieli Accelerator at the University of Calgary. She works at the intersection of research, policy, and lived experience, supporting teams to translate evidence into meaningful, inclusive practice. With a background in patient and community engagement, Rae brings a strengths-based, equity-focused lens to systems, including early childhood systems, emphasizing the voices of children, families, and educators. Her work focuses on making research usable, relational, and responsive to real-world contexts.

Day 2 • Session E1

Jody Merrick is the Manager of Early Childhood Services at Terra Centre for Teen Parents, supporting the Child and Family Support Centre. She has worked in the ELCC profession for more than 25 years across diverse contexts, including family day home, centre-based programs, school-based and faith-based preschool settings, as well as in roles as a Pedagogical Partner with ARCQE, Curriculum Facilitator within a nonprofit and Facilitator for the Flight Course through MacEwan for 9 years and is an experienced presenter. She is a graduate of the ELCC Diploma program at MacEwan University and holds a Bachelor of Human Services Administration degree.

Day 2 • Session D2

Lisa Palmer, M.Ed., is an Early Childhood Education Instructor at SAIT and has been an ELCC Instructor for the past decade in Calgary and Central Alberta. She is a SAIT Scholarly Activity Fellow and current Doctoral Candidate at the University of Calgary. She is completing research focusing on ELCC post-secondary curriculum to empower educators to support gender-diverse children and families. She holds a Level 3 Early Childhood Educator certification and has worked as a child care director and educator in Central Alberta prior to teaching at the post-secondary level.

Day 2 • Session E3

Parisa Radmanesh, BA, is the Manager of the Little Red Reading House, a magical place devoted to early literacy and a love of reading. Parisa coordinates family and community visits to the Reading House, leads school field trips, oversees the operation of the Little Red Reading Van, and works directly with children, youth, volunteers, and post-secondary students to move the needle on literacy in Calgary. With a background in the arts, post-secondary, government and corporate sectors, Parisa is a creative and a community builder dedicated to making literacy and the arts accessible to all Calgarians.

Day 2 • Session E1

Shaylene Saxton holds a Master of Arts in Innovative Early Childhood Education. She is excited to share, along with one of her co-authors, Jennifer Sibbald, her collaborative chapter on identity, voice, and the human right to participation in a forthcoming book, Learning with the Pedagogy of Reggio Emilia: Innovative Approaches to Early Childhood and Teacher Education (April 2026).

Day 1 • Session C1

Jennifer Sibbald, MA, is the Manager for Early Learning at MacEwan (ELM). Since 1972, ELM has been a centre of innovation, research and education, providing quality childcare to the university community as well as the broader community. Jennifer recognizes the importance of creating a community of learners by building nurturing relationships with children, families and educators.

Day 1 • Session C1

Erin Thomas is a Program Coach with Providence Inclusive Child Care in Calgary, supporting early learning programs through coaching, professional development, and leadership support. Her work is grounded in practitioner knowledge, lived classroom experience, and relational, trauma-informed approaches to inclusion. Erin specializes in translating research into practical, ethical strategies that strengthen belonging, identity, and participation. Small Moments, Big Impact reflects her commitment to collaborative, reflective learning that educators can use immediately in diverse early childhood settings.

Day 1 • Session B2

Manglevary Visvanathan has over 21 years of experience as an early childhood educator, working with children aged 2 to 6. She is committed to advocating for children's right to play and to creating inclusive learning environments in which children are respected, valued, and supported in their learning through play-based experiences. Manglesvary is a graduate of Red Deer Polytechnic and is currently enrolled in the Leadership program at the institution.

Day 2 • Love Letters to Play

Jessica-Lynn Walsh, MBBCh BAO MSc, is Manager of Community Partnered Research and Engagement with the Owerko Centre in Alberta Children's Hospital Research Institute at the University of Calgary. Dr. Walsh holds a medical degree from Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, and an MSc in Medical Sciences from the University of Calgary. She oversees the Little Red Reading House in Calgary and works at the intersection of research, community engagement and program innovation. Dr. Walsh also collaborates with local and provincial non-profits, such as the Kids Literacy Collective, to mobilize research to promote evidence-based programming and supports for children, youth, families and communities.

Day 2 • Session E1

Cody Topp is the CEO of TOPP Kids Out of School Clubs and Chair of the TOPP KIDS Foundation. He is also the Chair of SACDA and an active leader with the Alberta Leaders Caucus, where he advocates for high-quality, accessible school-age care across Alberta. A dedicated husband and father of two, Cody's work is rooted in family, community, leadership, and care. He is passionate about creating a higher standard of care by building strong school communities, supporting families, developing educators, and creating programs where children feel safe, connected, and inspired to play, grow, laugh, and learn while developing confidence, creativity, and life skills.

Day 1 • Leaders Panel

Dr. Therese Wiart Jenkinson is an associate professor at Mount Royal University. She has 30+ years of teaching kindergarten, being an early childhood educator and director, pedagogical partner and leader, post-secondary instructor, and learner of early childhood practice. She recently completed her doctorate in curriculum studies with toddlers at the University of Toronto.

Day 1 • Session A1

Katelyn Wombold graduated from the ELCC Diploma program at MacEwan in 2013. She has experience as a Facilitator for the MacEwan Flight Course and brings a rich perspective of co-creating infant and toddler environments, pedagogical documentation, inclusive practice alongside children and families with diverse needs and abilities, as well as working with vulnerable families in the community. Katelyn's passion is to empower children and families through a practice of relationships!

Day 2 • Session D2

REGISTRATION INFORMATION

CONFERENCE RATES

All prices include GST

Ticket Type	1 Day	Both Days
AECEA Professional Members	$94.50*	$189.00*
Non-Members	$120.75	$241.50
Students	$78.75	$157.50

* One conference registration at this rate per individual professional membership

Not an AECEA professional member? Become one today and be eligible for the discounted rate.

For more information and to purchase a membership, go here: https://aecea.ca/membership/professional-student

REGISTRATION

Registration deadline: May 20, 2026, at 5:00 PM

To complete your registration, visit: https://aecea.ca/2026-conference

Once payment is received, a receipt will be issued and emailed to the payee. Please ensure you register using an email address you will have access to on the day of the event. Only one registration per email address is permitted.

If you do not see your receipt after registering, please check your spam or junk folder.

If you have any questions, please contact info@aecea.ca.

CANCELLATION AND REFUND POLICY

All cancellation requests must be received by May 13, 2026, to receive a partial refund.

No refunds will be made for requests received after May 13, 2026. Refunds are subject to a 50% cancellation fee. Refunds will be issued in the same form payment was made. Please allow up to four weeks for processing.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT & RELEASE TIME FUNDING

Early childhood educators may be eligible for professional development (PD) and release time funding through the Early Childhood Educator Workforce Supports Program within the Government of Alberta. This funding is not automatic or guaranteed. Please see below for general eligibility information and the amount that has been approved for funding.

ELIGIBILITY

General eligibility information is outlined below. Individual circumstances may vary, so we encourage you to speak with your director or contact the Early Childhood Educator Workforce Supports Program directly to confirm your eligibility. To be eligible, educators must:

- ☐ Provide direct child care, including program supervisors and alternate supervisors (as defined in the ELCC Regulations), as well as agency coordinators or home visitors/consultants with a licensed family day home agency
- ☐ Be certified as a Level 1, 2, or 3 early childhood educator
- ☐ Be a Canadian citizen, permanent resident of Canada, or a temporary resident with a valid work or study permit
- ☐ Have worked in a licensed child care program for at least 720 hours within the last two years by the date of the conference
- ☐ Attend the conference live

APPROVED AMOUNTS

The Early Childhood Educator Workforce Supports Program has approved this conference for up to $241.50 in PD funding and up to 13.75 hours of release time funding, depending on which ticket you purchase.

HOW TO APPLY

Instructions on how to apply for PD and release time funding can be found here:
https://www.alberta.ca/early-childhood-educator-workforce-supports-program#jumplinks-4

NOTE: AECEA is not involved in PD or release time funding and is unable to answer questions related to it. If you have any questions, please reach out to your program director or the Early Childhood Educator Workforce Supports Program at:

Hours: 8:15 am to 4:30 pm (open Monday to Friday, closed statutory holidays)
Phone: 780-422-1119
Toll free: 1-800-661-9754
Email: childcarefunding@gov.ab.ca

THANK YOU

A conference like this does not happen without the hard work of a group of dedicated volunteers. The Association of Early Childhood Educators of Alberta would like to thank all the following volunteers on the AECEA conference committee:

Shirley Rempel
AECEA Board & Family Dayhome Provider

Stephanie Short
AECEA Board & Stepping Stones Daycare Society

Kathryn Cooper
AECEA Board & Davar Child Care Society

Alison Rinas
AECEA Board & Kids Included