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**Tsi ionterihwaienhstahkwa ne Kahwatsirano:ron Step By Step Child and Family Center Tsi  
Niionkwariho:ten Curriculum Framework for Ratiksa'tano:ron**

**2020**

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**END Acknowledgements**

*Our children belong in the heart of the community  
The 7 mothers*

***Beginnings:***

Step By Step was created in 1983 by seven mothers of preschool-aged children with more challenging needs and no opportunities for education in Kahnawake. The mothers envisioned a space where each child would be valued and supported to grow and learn at their own pace in a joyful, inclusive, and creative environment. The women created a centre that embodied the Kanien'kehá:ka culture so that children could deepen their relationship and contribution to family, community, culture, and the environment.

Traditionally, children had a very valued role in our societies. They were not viewed as people whom we created and moulded, but rather they were a **gift** to us and merely on loan from mother earth. Everyone had a unique role and responsibility in teaching the child and being taught **by** them. We recognize that children enter the world with enormous capacity, curiosity, and an eagerness to learn and contribute. Our role is to guide the child and walk beside them on this important life journey – this **pathway** to learning. Children's early learning is a precious, communal responsibility that honours and engages all our relations.

***“The continuing voice of community is calling for a culturally-based education,  
for the students of Kahnawake.”***

The **KEC Tsi Niionkwariho:ten Program and Curriculum Framework** highlights that the community aspirations to have a strong Kanien'kehá:ka curriculum rooted in our ways has been unchanging and continuously reaffirmed over time. The KEC framework outlines a curriculum using Tsi Niionkwariho:ten as its core teaching that is “rooted in our Kanien'kehá:ka world view”. As the first stage in the educational journey on this path for many of the children of Kahnawake, Step By Step Child and Family Center embraces this position. We are committed to the development of a curriculum framework for early childhood which is consistent with what we know from the Western literature but, most importantly, that is informed by Tsi Niionkwariho:ten, is valued and accepted by parents and the general community and celebrates who we are as Onkwehon:we people.

***Tsi Niionkwariho:ten and the wisdom of Step By Step Staff (2020)***

**Skén:nen: Peace**

- To treat everyone with respect and compassion
- To be reflective, disciplined, mindful and having self-knowledge and pride and comfort in personal identity
- To support each other with trust and understanding
- To respect and honour the environment and the spiritual world

### **Ka'nikonhri:io: Good Mind**

- To communicate honestly, openly share your feelings, and be a supportive team member
- To have sympathy, patience and understanding
- To think positively/flipping the negative to a positive
- To Have a good sense of humor

### **Ka'shatsenhsera: Strength/Empowerment**

- To achieve unity; accept differences and where people are at
- To have humility and the strength to admit if you're wrong; open to learning new things
- To lead silently and through actions, remaining respectful, appreciative, positively focused
- To Teach others and share knowledge and skills with future generations

### ***Tsi Niionkwariho:ten***

*Our curriculum needs to be a visible reflection of the cultural values instilled in everything. Values are what you carry in your heart. Tsi Niionkwariho:ten is a way of being; it is not a subject.*

A curriculum based in ***Tsi Niionkwariho:ten*** ensures the continuance of the knowledge of our ancestors and is held up by the three principle values of:

- **Ka'nikonhri:ro:** Good mind: with a good mind we always look at people, no matter who, as family; bringing a message of good tidings, having righteousness and Justice, a connectedness to land and nature;
- **Ka'satstenhsera:** Strength/Empowerment: strength in the union, in the family; having one-mindedness and social protection;
- **Skén:nen:** Peace: there will be no fear, there will be calm; living a life of peace, contentedness and social stability.

We know that there are many different ways to understand Tsi Niionkwariho:ten, and our work at Step By Step reflects our intentions to build this foundation of understanding together through our use of the Tsi ionterihwaienhstahkwa ne Kahwatsirano:ron Step By Step Child and Family Center Tsi Niionkwariho:ten Curriculum Framework for Ratiksa'tano:ron.

As we engage with each other with a good mind, united and respectful, we want to question ourselves about how we embody the principles of Ka'nikonhri:io, Skén:nen and Ka'satstenhsera in our work:

How do these values become part of our professional practice and the way we engage with children, parents and each other;

How do we weave together our understanding of Tsi Niionkwariho:ten and the universal principles of exemplary practice in early childhood education;

How does our understanding evolve and deepen over time with each new generation of staff, children, and families?

The ***Step By Step Child and Family Center Tsi Niionkwariho:ten Curriculum Framework for Ratiksa'tano:ron*** was designed to encourage us to think, question, reflect and generate discussions to support the continued development of joyful spaces where adults and children live and learn together. Through our engagement in a collegial process of thinking about our practice, we will build understanding and community and find meaning in our work together.

*Kahnawake means "by the rapids" and the image of moving through rapids can serve as a meaningful metaphor for how we envision our use of this framework. Our discussions might be turbulent at times and our understanding will be dynamic, always changing and evolving, and always moving forward.*

Like the flowing river, we are part of something bigger than ourselves and so we must take the long view of our work as early childhood educators. Our ancestors taught us that we must look forward and back as we accumulate our indigenous knowledge and wisdom. The fundamental principles of ***Tsi Niionkwariho:ten***, rooted in culture, are constant and will never change. But the children, families, and staff of Step By Step will be different every year. They will be the voices of the next generations – the seven generations – and will bring their varied histories, experiences, and perspectives to the conversation. We will honour this diversity as it supports us in building an evolving and enriched understanding that is ***Tsi Niionkwariho:ten***.

### ***Tsi Niionkwariho:ten Curriculum Framework Principles***

The following framework principles reflect the integration of our traditional understanding of ***Tsi Niionkwariho:ten*** as it relates to our knowledge of the universal principles of early childhood education. To support educators in their thought process and discussions about teaching and learning, they have been broken down into eight separate point. We must always remember that our world view is holistic and as such all elements are interrelated. Our challenge will always be to sustain that understanding as we explore the meaning and practice of ***Tsi Niionkwariho:ten*** in our work together.

## Holistic Learning and Development: Akwe:kon kaka'enionhon

*All learning has to engage the child in a meaningful way. The Creation Story and Ohenton Kariwatekwhen teach us that we have to take care of the whole child, and everything is interconnected.*

Our indigenous world view emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life and creation. It is **holistic**. As applied to the early education of a child, *holistic learning* focuses on the whole growth of the child instead of on specific parts. Furthermore, holistic learning is based on the notion that each child finds identity, meaning and purpose in life through their connections to people, culture, the community, and the natural world.

We must always keep in mind that early learning is a balancing of the physical (**Tsi nihota:kari:te**), emotional (**Tsi nihrohno:ten**), intellectual (**Tsi nihaweientehtatshero:ten**), and spiritual (**Tsi nithawehtahkwen**) aspects of a young child's life, knowing that this holistic harmony will bring lifelong growth and mental and spiritual wellness.

*Education should be about putting things back in the cultural basket: colonization took them out.*

As children make their way through the landscape of experiences, they build their confidence and skills and also begin to shape their values and beliefs about who they are as Onkwehon:we and their place in the family, community, and larger world. Children learn **Ka'nikonhri:io**, **Ské:nen**, and **Ka'satstenhsera** at the developmental level appropriate to them. Most importantly they learn the value of respect for the world and all that they will find within it. Even at the earliest age we teach children about the meaning and behaviors of respect. Over time they will learn that as Onkwehon:we, their actions will impact not only themselves, but their family, friends, teachers, the environment and the seven generations to come.

*I always say to children "we're going on an adventure" and they ask, "where's that?" I tell them I have no idea where we're going and then in that spirit, we find learning in connection to everything.*

Having this holistic view of learning ensures the generational transfer of knowledge to children which is connected to their lived experience of traditions, ceremonies, stories, and life in the community. All of these elements are fundamental and contribute to the child's path to knowledge. All our relations join the children going on this adventure!

*If my children are happy and actively engaged and I can identify their abilities, strengths and interests to further plan and provide interesting activities and investigations for them, then I feel good.*

We can teach children well when we understand all the dimensions of their being. In order to do that we provide a rich and broad curriculum that enables children to build their capacities across many dimensions of growth. Our culture will guide the way to creating that curriculum which is firmly grounded in and shaped by Ka'nikonhri:io, Ske:nen, and Ka'satstenhsera. A holistic view of child development represents **Tsi Niionkwariho:ten** and supports a balanced and harmonious path to learning and wellness.

### **Inclusion and Belonging: Akwe:kon skatne, Tewakwe:kon**

*"We are not each the same but we each deserve equal consideration. If as educators we create a culture where this is clear, children will understand that we don't have to treat each of them the same and it's okay. If staff have a good mind, we can do this."*

We respect, value, and celebrate diversity. Children need to know that **even in their difference** they belong and have a connection to their peers and their community and the broader world in which they live. And that they can **make a difference**. Since its beginning, Step By Step's vision of inclusion has been that every child belongs, all children can learn, all educators can teach all children, and all learning is legitimate.

Historically, differently-abled children were considered to have *special powers*; they were honoured and revered. Today we understand children whose needs might challenge us to be our great teachers. They teach us how to be caring and creative in the face of diversity and what it means to truly belong.

*"It's hard to ask for help. Sometimes when we do we feel defeated. It's about our attitudes. Can't we just work together as Tsi Niionkwarihoten?"*

Inclusion reflects what we want for **all** children and their families and for all staff. It's not always easy to find the way to balance the very diverse needs of children and adults whether they are in a classroom, a workplace or even in a family. In order to really achieve the creation of an inclusive centre, we need to practice it, struggle with it, and celebrate it every day in the safe and caring spaces we create together.

*It's Tsi Niionkwariho:ten to teach children about their heart; we give a piece of ours so that our friends can feel better. It is our job, it's community and it's what we do. We can send out love when we hug and think good thoughts.*

Children who receive an early education focused on inclusion will learn to appreciate and care for one another, to be a strong friend and ally and will learn that vulnerability – a quality which we share as human beings – is a strength rather than a weakness. These are values which they will take with them into the future as they become parents, care-givers to elders, teachers, shop owners, maintenance workers and more. An understanding of inclusion brings meaning to

our practice, reassuring us all that we can draw on the community for support throughout our lives.

### **Image of the Child: Nurturing a Positive and Vital Kanien'kehá:ka Identity**

#### ***Onkani:l : Who are you? ii ii This is Me***

Where do I come from? What does my name mean? Why do we do this in this way? These are all important questions children ask as they struggle to define themselves as individuals and as Onkwehon:we people. We learn from our elders that both the questions and the answers guide us to look forward and back as we help children develop a strong Kanien'kehá:ka identity. Children are born with a sense of knowing and connection to the spirit world and they are capable of deep learning. Early childhood is a critical time for us to support children in their understanding of who they are and their place in the world. Children can learn in a meaningful way through developmentally appropriate activities which make visible and concrete the links between the past, the present, the future and their relationship to it all as Onkwehon:we.

*A name is a gift given at the naming ceremony in the Kahnosesne. It is raised up for all to see and say, "That's you. That's how you will grow into your name; it is the road you will take."*

A name provides us with an image of the child which is embraced by the culture, and it is positive and powerful. Children don't yet know their gifts and so our role is to nurture them along that path, helping them to fulfill the potential inherent within their name. Our cultural view of a child is built on a foundation of **capacity**; it is always the starting point. We believe that children are born as thinking and caring beings. They are competent and confident learners, and they have a spiritual depth and curiosity. They deserve our respect.

*Tsi Niionhkwariho:ten is all about building a positive cultural identity. There's no argument about it; that's the way it is! It says to the child "you have a responsibility to be this way".*

Our culture has taught us that children also have a role to play and a social responsibility — **Shakoienawa:se, thorihawaier:ri** - to learn and by the ways of Tsi Niionhkwari:hoten. At this early stage of development children are just beginning to learn about their emotions and how to develop empathy. Our cultural teachings support a social-emotional foundation from which children can develop as caring individuals and build a healthy and positive Kaniehkeha'ka identity. Above all else we teach children to be respectful; of each other, their parents and family and towards mother earth. Building this sense of responsibility helps a child learn to think beyond themselves and to know that they are part of a grand community of people as Onkwehon:we.

*That little guy influenced me; he was like "just let me find meaning in everything!" And he was a big influence on other children too. He lifted everyone up. He was so inspiring. He was one of these kids who you know was going to be a leader.*



We created a learning environment based on the Ohenton Karihwaterkwen and the cycle of ceremonies of the Rotinonshon:ni calendar to promote Kaniehkéha language and cultural learning. The cycle of ceremonies is used as a foundation for delivering curriculum projects and activities throughout the year through classroom, community and Kahnosesne experiences. As we welcome and invite families, elders, and community members into our activities we can **all** reflect on our traditions and the lives of our ancestors and how we are practicing Tsi Niionkwariho:ten today. When we rejoice in learning and being together in this way, we model to children what it means to be Onkwehon:we and share in community life.

*One of the greatest joys of teaching is hearing a child say “I did it” **kaniehkeha words needed here as I could not discern them** Social-emotional and spiritual growth is so important at this age, and this is why I try to place the greatest efforts in these areas. If we don’t believe in our children, they will not flourish to their potential.*

Language is the voice of the culture and is the truest and most expressive means for the transmission of Tsi Niionkwariho:ten. We want children to hear the beauty of Kaniehkéha all around them all the time and to learn to use the language in the everyday experiences of the classroom. We grow vocabulary and capacity in everyone – children and adults – by singing and listening to songs and stories in Kaniehkéha, by labelling the objects around us and by *talking out loud* using whatever words and phrases we have to describe our actions and to communicate our thoughts and feelings. Tsi Niionkwariho:ten is knowing that all children will succeed when the foundations to their learning are based on understanding and respect for their language and cultural roots.

### **Sken:nen Na’tetewateronion: There is peace amongst us**

*“The key to success for anybody’s life be it human, animal or bird is this...if you wanna have health and good life, you must make that person, that thing, feel important and wanted. And they will grow, and they will have health and they will have success.”*

- Iroquois Teaching from Tom Porter Sakokwenioskwas

The principal goal of early childhood education is to promote the overall well-being of the child, creating the best possible conditions for growth, learning and development. Tsi Niionkwarihoten helps us understand that well-being – **skén:nen** - includes all the holistic domains and is deeply connected to family and all our relations. **Skén:nen** can only be nurtured in an environment that is safe, respectful, and caring and is best achieved in an atmosphere where cultural traditions which support well-being are practiced and valued and where community connections are fostered. Where there is peace amongst us.

*We need to hold each other more; we know that the holding environment in itself is healing.*

Relationships provide the framework for well-being and development. **WE** are the hub around which a child's life revolves. Our children reside in the centre of a broad circle of care which includes parents, grandparents, educators, our spiritual ancestors, and the natural world. The Creation Story teaches us that we all come understand, depend on and value our connections. The three pillars of ***Ka'nikonhri:ro, Sken:nen and Ka'shatsenhsera*** support us like strong hands in living our lives well . These traditional values hold us up. Within Step By Step, we hold children and their families, and we hold each other as we are **all** held within our cultural community. This is the *circle of security* which brings **Sken:non Na'tetewateronion**.

*Parents trust us to care for their children. I want each child to know that I am here to listen to you; I am here to hear you.*

***Sherihwakwenienhst Kahwa:tsire*** – attachment- is the special relationship between a child and their caregiver whether that be a parent, auntie, neighbor, or educator. We are **hard-wired** for relationships, ready to engage with others the moment we are born. But it is only through relationships that feel safe and secure – **positive** attachment relationships – that a child will develop a sense of well-being and self-worth. The trust and attachment that comes through this *circle of security* provides a **secure base** to fuel the child's curiosity and desire to explore the world and experience joyful learning. We create that secure base by **watching over** a child as they take risks to explore the unknown; by **enjoying** with them; by **delighting** merely in the fact that they exist and by **helping** a child- *just enough*- to meet challenges and so build their confidence.

*When sky woman was on the turtle's back the animals took care of her, had empathy and respect for her. She needed them and asked for their help, and they saw her need. They were the hands.*

Essential to developing a secure attachment is the child knowing that their caregiver is emotionally available to them – especially during the hard times. We call this ***Skátne Tenéhsek*** – ***Let us stay here together***. We want children to know that we will stay with them through the difficult and painful feelings until they feel better again.

*I always think about children and their families when they might be in a dark place; in a place in life that's not great and then know that children remember that they learned this at Step By Step. That they can go for a walk in the trees; go to Onake and paddle or take another medicine like feeling the sun and give thanks and so feel good about themselves again.*

We have many ways in our culture for guiding children in the understanding and management of their emotions. Our legends and stories can be told in ways that help children identify their feelings and cope with the challenges of their lives. Medicine for healing can also be found everywhere and children can learn that medicine is not just plants or pills. **They** are medicine for each other; twirling, chasing, drawing, singing, dancing, and doing what they feel passionately about and sharing it, is medicine.

## **Sherihwakwenienhst Kahwa:tsire: Building our Relationships to Family**

*Relationships bring meaning to our lives. We are all part of a grand community of people, and we have to have respect of all the different roles.*

In working to promote the well-being of every child at Step By Step, we must remember that their well-being is interdependent with that of their parents, family, and the broader community. Children will experience a sense of well-being and so will learn and develop best when educators foster relationships with the web of connection which surrounds the child. These relationships must be based on trust, care and most importantly, **respect**. We honor all life and all people through the giving of our deepest respect. Children thrive in responsive and respectful relationships and adults do too. And so, we want to embrace a pedagogy of *deep listening and respect* in order to live and learn alongside children and their families in harmony.

*Relationships are the answers...for all the questions.*

Parents are the child's first and most important teachers having the most significance in their lives and throughout their lives. They have an intimate knowledge of their child which is invaluable to educators as we plan for the continuity of learning and care of **Kahwatsirano:ron**; their precious children. We recognize parents as experts; they know their child best and have the long vision of their lives in their minds. We also want to secure a partnership with a child's family. Partnership by definition can only happen between equals. That means that our practice of deep listening and respect must be brought to our work of learning about the child through the eyes and the wisdom of their family.

*Sometimes I feel angry with parents; they leave their child and rush off. They don't know how much they mean to the child. Then I remember that I have to be the hands for them too.*

In order to support a family to be fully engaged in their child's life at Step By Step, we create a welcoming atmosphere for all. Welcoming is not just represented by the invitations we extend but also by the way in which we reach out, ask about the parent's experience, listen, and respond to what they say. In our efforts to know a family, we take a strength-based approach, recognizing that each family has unique gifts which they bring to the relationship and to our developing understanding of the child. It is **Tsi niionkwariho:ten** to establish an authentic and respectful connection to a child's family knowing that it is key to the child's success in school.

## **Connecting to and Organizing the Environment: Tewarihwakwenienst Tsi lohontsa:te**

*The word environment is a spiritual one; like the Ohen:ton Karihwatekwen, it surrounds. It reflects our way and the way of the earth. WE are the environment.*

The earth is our mother, and we share this world with all creatures, plants, trees and living entities. As our cultural foundation for learning, the **Ohen:ton Karihwaterkwen** teaches us that we are all connected – there is solidarity between humans and nature and all that it provides. We are also **stewards** of this earth, meant to care for that which takes care of us, knowing that the earth responds to kindness and respect as humans do. Our children are very capable of caring deeply and actively about all forms of life. And so, it is critical that we nurture their understanding of their relationship to the natural world and their responsibility to it as Onkwehon:we.

*We need to help children appreciate the elements of nature as if they were humans, living here. I tell the children, "That tree over there on the hill is Bob. He's my friend. The tree is not just standing there; it does a lot of work". Now they hug Bob when they see that tree. They can relate and see that the tree is not separate from us.*

In addition to creating curriculum which supports a child's recognition of their responsibility to mother earth, an understanding of our inter-connectedness to the environment has further impacts on our pedagogy. We know that children need interactions with the natural world as a regular part of their healthy growth in **all** areas of development. These experiences develop their physical skills and well-being, building strength and reducing stress. Opportunities to engage with the environment support children's creative and imaginative play and so their cognitive growth. And finally, through play and exploration of the natural world we are able to promote peer relationships, teach about collaboration and negotiation and so enrich and nurture a child's social-emotional capacity.

*Being an early childhood educator means wearing many hats...we must be planners and designers, arranging our classrooms, planning our schedules and curriculum with intention and purpose.*

Often referred to as the "third teacher," a thoughtful and intentionally planned environment acts as a facilitator in the learning process of young children and reflects the fact that children learn holistically - both from their interactions with people, objects and with the natural and spiritual world. The way in which we organize environment can provoke and challenge complex thinking while engendering a sense of wonder and awe. For young children our environments need to be filled with opportunities for multi-sensory experience so that children learn through and develop the sense of touch, taste, hearing, smell and more. As we create environments which encourage a child's natural sense of exploration, creativity, and discovery we also want to emphasize connections to culture and community and fostering children's relationships to each other.

*Once when some branches fell on the ground, we used it to go over, under, on top. We talked about the branches being the babies of the tree and so we have to take care of big trees too. This was about developing the physical, critical thinking and a sense of responsibility.*

Children play with and use materials to learn about the world, explore questions and represent and reflect on their thinking. Materials are the bones of the curriculum and although they have their own concrete life, they are transformed through their encounters with children. Open-ended materials will encourage creativity and result in more opportunities for complex learning. The materials we choose also supports our image of the child and the educational vision we have for them. And so, we take care to select materials which reflect an enhanced view of children and their capacities. We want to provide **materials** more than **activities**; materials that are from nature, beautiful, open-ended, and flexible in their use so the child is free to explore and learn in their own way.

***Communication and Literacy : Conveying knowledge through Kanien'kehá:ka Storytelling***

*The truth about stories is, that's all we are."*

*Thomas King*

Early childhood is a critical period for children to develop competence and confidence in their ability to understand and communicate through the use of language; both Kaniehkéha and English. We think and communicate our thoughts through language. And as with all aspects of early learning, our holistic world view informs us that children learn language in relation to others and their surroundings, encompassing their family, community, and the natural world. Through their active participation in each of these environments, children will learn as well as influence the language and literacy practices of the community.

*Everything is in the Ohenton Kariwahtekwen and there is no wrong way to do it. It's personal. We should create a sign language version for all children to learn not just the child who is using it to communicate.*

An inclusive early childhood environment recognizes that there are many ways to communicate. Certain children will express themselves verbally, while others will learn and use sign language, and some will utilize pictures to tell us what's on their minds. Literacies have multiple shapes including music, math, rhythm, art, legends, poems, dances, and stories of the culture. All of these make use of different sign systems. Language uses the alphabet; art uses line, color, shape, and pattern; math uses numbers; music uses notes and drama and dance use gesture, posture, and movement symbols. Our work is to support the child to use and transform these symbols in ways that result in a meaningful expression of self.

*I have gained a better understanding of how a child who has a lot of knowledge can also teach another child that same knowledge in a different way than I would.*

Children communicate with each other using the emerging capacities of language and literacy and often surprise us with what they know and can teach when left to their own devices. In the holistic learning spirit, our emphasis on communication and literacy teaching serves to expand a child's social experience as well as their cognitive skills. Peer to peer interaction both contributes to literacy development and is a vehicle for literacy production.

Children also engage in literacy experiences and exchanges when we offer such activities as scribbling and writing, block-building, photography, map-making, sculpture and use of the computer and other technologies. These various mediums- *100 languages of children*- support children to create a *literate identity* for themselves, building their communication so as to fully represent their thinking and imagination. Our role is to stimulate all aspects of communication and literacy in an environment rich in symbols, sounds, technology, books, language, and art.

*“I find children listen better to a Kanien’keha:ka story;” “Children become calmer.”*

“Come, I’m going to read a story.” With those words we think of cuddling in Doda’s lap. We remember the feeling of excitement for the story to come and comfort in being with someone we love and with whom we feel safe. We want to embody that feeling for children in all aspects of their learning at Step By Step.

We are grounded in oral tradition, and through our stories, we communicate truths – factual, historical, cultural, spiritual, and emotional - about our people and community across the generations. We live in a world filled with the written word, and books are one of the most accessible and popular forms of literacy engagement. Even so, we want children to also fully appreciate the significance of a living **oral tradition** and to honour it. Stories *written* on a felt board, told, danced, and sung form the narrative of our people and are an essential part of our ability to survive and thrive. So, we take a broad approach to communication and literacy teaching, ensuring that our oral tradition is valued and practiced with children throughout the day.

*“Kaniehkéha words can sound or translate so funny...it’s why we have such a sense of humor!”*

In our endeavor to foster a vital Kanien’kehá:ka identity, we know that children will learn the value of their culture the more they learn the language. Therefore, we want to develop both the children’s and our **own** ability to speak Kaniehkéha. It is so important that Kaniehkéha is valued and used throughout the day in all activities. As we support children to define themselves as Onkwehón:we people, communication and literacy development using our stories, arts, language, and traditions embodies **Tsi Niionhkwari:hoten**.

### **Trauma –informed Attachment Care: Recognizing Trauma While Celebrating Resilience**

*“We know we cannot live in the past, but the past lives in us.”*

Trauma can freeze us in the past. It is the emotional, psychological, and physiological residue left over from heightened and prolonged stress accompanied by intense fear, threat, violence,

and life-challenging events. Trauma has affected our connections to each other and our culture through practices of colonization. These have included residential and Indian Day Schools experienced by many in Kahnawake. Trauma can also be experienced through neglect, disrupted family and community connections and experiences of poverty. Some children have or are currently experiencing security challenges that impact their global development. Trauma-informed care practices recognize the effect these life experiences have on shaping thoughts, feelings, behaviour and, in particular, a developing sense of trust and safety in relationships. No matter when we experience trauma, its effects can endure.

*“At one time children weren’t heard or respected; they didn’t have a voice. So now as adults we have difficulty sharing feelings and trusting that we are safe to do so.”*

The significant losses experienced through trauma over multi-generations – sometimes referred to as a “soul wound” have been profound and extensive. They have included a loss of cultural knowledge and practices, language, and spirituality; a loss of native and individual identity, the traditional family system; loss of self-esteem and pride and a loss of parenting ability and confidence. All these losses leave us without a sense of safety that comes through a traditional structure in which healing can occur. Each child or adult will carry their own unique experiences of trauma, and so we must recognize its origins and its impact on the people we serve as well as on ourselves as educators. As difficult as the task might be, to understand trauma and release ourselves from shame or guilt, we must continuously talk about our experiences and the ways we can support each other to heal. We must connect. Our worldview and traditions inform us that relationships with adults and other children as well as with nature and the spiritual world - are the most powerful source of healing.

***“ Our children are inherently rebellious; our history of residential schools and colonization have affected our way of thinking. We are not followers; we need to know the purpose of what we’re being asked to do”.***

Trauma does not define who we are. It’s essential that we acknowledge our resilience and strength, which is deep inside us and very present within our culture and people. The focus of Step By Step as a trauma-informed centre is to create safety and security for children, families, and staff members and to sustain trauma awareness in our organizational and pedagogical practices.

***We can find medicine everywhere. Paddling is medicine,***

Children need to develop trust and connection to feel safe. We begin by knowing the child, their history, and the possible reasons for their behaviour. Understanding the experience of the child assists us in developing compassion, patience, and empathy. Just practicing these qualities alone is a key intervention strategy. We want children to feel welcome to share their delight and enjoyment as they explore the world and to feel safe to come to us for help, protection, emotional regulation, and comfort.

***It's not just about what we say, it's also how OUR bodies move. Kids read body language and they have this whole awareness***

We cannot be attuned and supportive to the child if we don't also work to know ourselves, our stressors, and triggers and what we can do to regulate our emotions. To help a child to emotionally regulate, we must pay attention to our **anchors**, what we are communicating with our tone of voice, our body position, our face, our words, and our touch.

If children can grow up with a good mind, knowing and being strengthened by the teachings of the culture, they then can develop safe and secure relationships and teach their own children without guilt, shame, and fear. This is **Tsi Niionhkwarho:ten** and it is key to the future development of a resilient, strong and loving community.

### **Learning through Play and Exploration – Ohen:ton Karihwatehkwen, Kahwa:tsire**

*My most joyful memory is being out in the community all day with my cousins, brothers, and sisters. We only came home when it was time for supper.*

Traditionally, Ratiksa okan:a were free to explore their environments. Children “*were at your feet*” alongside adults – watching and listening - as they worked in the house, garden, kitchen, and elsewhere in the community. This kind of play was considered the **work** of children and was viewed as having equal value to adult work. It was known that children were learning by doing and that their learning took place everywhere, all the time. Understanding the variety of activities that comprise play and appreciating their value in early learning is a key part of our Indigenous knowledge that is now recognized in the early childhood education literature.

Play is a child's way of understanding and making sense of the world. At play, children are empowered to learn in their own unique way and within their own time. They engage in “*what if*” thinking as they speculate about what they encounter in the world. Children develop new ideas and invent solutions as they play, explore, and wonder. Play is an important vehicle for developing *executive functioning*, key skills and brain functions which support a child to make decisions, stay focused and attentive, wait, share, be persistent in the face of challenges and control their emotional state. Through play, a child can learn as much from *failure* as from *success*, as the **process** is what's important rather than the end product. And the process of play is, of course, fun!

*We may put something out intentionally and then the kids will create something that represents a whole different idea or way of seeing it. Being open to that shows respect to the child.*

Through imaginative play, children can develop their symbolic understanding. They can imagine themselves in roles based on the models they have observed and invent new roles for themselves that reflect community and cultural life. Children can be PeaceKeepers, Fishermen and Fisherwomen, Traditional Dancers, Teachers, Doda's dispensing their wisdom and more. They push the boundaries of their thinking, observe, and discover patterns, categories,



classifications, and qualities, all the while making thinking visible to us through their interaction with materials. Key communication skills develop with children learning vocabulary that is descriptive, having a variety of functions – requesting; commenting; describing; projecting - while becoming increasingly more complex. Through play, a child engages in *emergent literacy*, emergent referring to the child’s entrance into the world of words and language through oral traditions like story-telling and singing. This then leads to *reading and writing* through the use of books, written symbols, and words. Play allows a child’s skills to build gradually and incrementally and to scaffold up the ladder of learning.

*When I saw Kylee laughing and trying to join the girl’s play, I had tears in my eyes. They used her communication board, and they sang and danced together, and she was part of it.*

Play is a powerful connector. **All** children can play, and it is often through play that educators can find the best ways to maximize every child’s participation and highlight the strengths and gifts they bring to the situation. And play can be oh so silly and should be! Silly play allows children to share in the free-flowing form of nonsense that can be expressed in words, movement, and the creation of imaginary worlds.

*The simplest materials can foster the greatest creativity.*

As educators support a child’s development in play, we consider what type of environments will provide them with a variety and range of sustained opportunities for play-based learning. Our work is to be attentive and responsive to the play of children by providing materials, space and instructions which encourage growing complexity in children’s play. We know that the child who enters school with a strong communication and literacy foundation, confidence, creativity, persistence, knowing how to make friends and being excited about learning will succeed. These are the qualities that children acquire through play. The holistic learning benefits of play represent **Tsi niionkwariho:ten** and is essential to the child’s development.