



## **Sexual Abuse Prevention Program Statement (SAPP)**

### **Who are we and how are we evolving as an organization?**

One of the AECEO's goals is to build the collective voice of Early Childhood Educators who we trust to work creatively, collaboratively and responsively with children, families, and communities. In doing this work, we understand educators, children, families, and communities as inevitably dependent and inextricably interdependent whereby responsive care relations are *the foundation* of good practice and quality care environments. While our mandate has evolved over time, one focus of our organization today is to critically engage with sociopolitical forces that undermine the work, value, and experiences of ECEs (and allied professionals) and advocate for change at the program, system and public policy-level. We embrace our work as political, recognizing our responsibility to identify and challenge the chronic undervaluing of (highly gendered) ECEs. But we also know we have much to learn. In the past few years, we have prioritized efforts to think with an anti-racist/anti-oppressive lens through ongoing engagement with Black, Indigenous and newcomer educators, communities, children, and families. We are also working to establish stronger relationships with LGBTQIA2S communities to ensure we support gender and sexual minority educators, children, and families. We are thinking with these communities in voicing our concerns about the mandated SAPP.

### **Why this statement?**

We are writing this statement to make public our thinking about the implementation of the SAPP. We take sexual abuse very seriously and are expressing deep concern about the implications of this program on children, families and educators who have experienced/are experiencing sexual abuse. We are also concerned about the effects that this program, seemingly rooted in a surveillance model, could disproportionately have on racialized and queer children, families, and educators. We are motivated by an intention to reduce harm and increase space for healing at an individual and community level.

### **The Sexual Abuse Prevention Program: Backgrounder**

In February 2021, we published a statement in relation to ECEs and child protection. As an organization, we made the decision to discontinue the publication of *A Child In Need of Protection*, a resource used in some Ontario-based post-secondary Early Childhood Education programs to guide ECEs in fulfilling their legal obligations to report child abuse. Fundamentally, we felt this resource was exacerbating the disproportionate reporting and investigations of racialized, low socioeconomic status (SES) and other marginalized children and families within existing child protection systems. More recently we have extended our thinking to consider how gay and queer folks experience high amounts of suspicion and pathologizing in their everyday

interactions with children. In this statement, we suggested the College of Early Childhood Educators (CECE) was best positioned to provide information regarding Registered Early Childhood Educators (RECE) legal obligations to the public so our focus could remain on recognizing the voices and lived experiences of ECEs.

In January 2022, the CECE announced the introduction of a mandatory Sexual Abuse Prevention Program (SAPP) similar to what the Ontario College of Teachers has recently implemented. According to the CECE, the government mandated training “provides an opportunity to reinforce the position of trust they have with families and their community in terms of child protection”. Beginning in July 2022, pre-packaged, online training modules (compiled by the Centre for Child Protection and branded *Teatree Tells*) will be offered through the CECE. It is currently unclear when the deadline for completion of these SAPP online modules will be required for RECEs though it is clear that these training modules will be required to maintain active registration with the CECE in the near future. The CECE has also indicated that the completion of these modules can be included in RECEs ongoing Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) requirement.

### **Our concerns**

First and foremost, we are concerned about educators. We recognize that RECEs are predominantly women, many of whom have their own histories of sexual abuse. We are concerned that completing the online modules may be triggering and/or upsetting for educators who may not have access to community-based and/or private supports. Publicly supported individual and group counselling services are typified by long wait lists within an overall context of scarcity, while private counselling/therapy is costly, upwards of \$120 per hour (it goes without saying that this is not typically within the budget of a RECE earning less than \$25/hour). While we know emergency crisis services exist, we recognize that *ongoing* support is necessary to work through and process sexual trauma that this training may bring up. Both the development and take up of the modules must be done *with* communities, facilitated by licensed professionals with expertise in gender-based violence through a trauma-informed lens. Standardized curriculum models guiding educators on if, how and when to intervene in suspected child abuse without ensuring participants have the social, emotional, and intellectual space to actively process the information *with* others is problematic.

Second, we are concerned that the SAPP may exacerbate the overrepresentation of racialized, low SES, LGBTQIA2S, and otherwise marginalized children and families in child protection systems. Although the CECE mentioned that there were components of this training that dealt with issues of anti-racism, these components were presented as optional, at the learners’ discretion rather than foundational to the process. We also wonder if and/or how the training takes up the pathologizing of queer/trans children, educators and parents. While the CECE suggests the SAPP program will “reinforce the position of trust they have with families and their community in relation to child protection”, we are curious *how* this can occur within a context where children and families may be understandably fearful of systems that have, and continue to, harm them and their communities. This is particularly true for Indigenous, Black communities and LGBTQIA2S in Ontario and Canada. We are concerned that the time and labour-intensive trust and solidarity established between educators, children and families in the context of

ongoing, complex relationships, will be downplayed in favour of seemingly objective “indicators” of sexual abuse, or “predatory” behavior, that have very high-stakes implications for children and families within society’s rigid institutional structures. We fear that the extremely fragile, trusting relationships built through thousands of interactions in particular contexts may be sacrificed in the name of “safety”, causing more harm. We understand these deeply nuanced, unique relationships to be a central path towards establishing the reparative conditions necessary for healing to occur—particularly for families that already experience multiple oppressions. This does not mean that educators personally take on the very real, complex challenges facing children and families. Indeed, this would be dangerous for them as much as for children and families. It does mean that educators are systemically supported to exercise their own professional judgement whereby their relationship with families is central, rather than peripheral, to decisions related to action. With such support, educators are safe to question unbalanced power relations between children, families, themselves, and the hegemonic social systems in place.

### **Our recommendations**

We recognize there are no easy solutions here—indeed thinking that simple solutions exist is a major part of the problem. What we do suggest however is that rolling out a standardized online module in relation to sexual abuse “prevention” is an oversimplistic “solution” to meaningfully identifying and supporting children and families who have experienced/are experiencing sexual abuse. Such a training approach can have harmful impacts for LGBTQ2S, racialized, low SES, and Indigenous families. *These conversations about child sexual abuse need to be scaffolded through programs that initiate dialogue, considerations of social position and identities, as well as centralizing social justice concerns.*

Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest increased training related to identifying and reporting child abuse plays any role in *preventing* child abuse—precisely what the name of the program claims. Instead, *we suggest a bi-directional, intentional process of engaging with educators in relation to sexual abuse, who have their own experiences and histories, is necessary for everyone: children, families, and educators.* We wonder if and/or how children, families and educators who have lived experience in child abuse have been a part of the process of deciding what information may be helpful for educators in relation to sexual abuse prevention. Similarly, we wonder what their hopes and/or fears may be about this program.

We also emphasize the need to consider the increased potential for harm for racialized children, families, and educators, as well as LGBTQIA2S communities, particularly gay and queer folks who are RECEs, with the SAPP as is. As it stands, the SAPP appears to be a very much top-down approach to engaging with a deeply personal, very high-stakes issue.

We wish to re-iterate that sexual abuse is an issue in which we care deeply. Sexual abuse is an issue that too many of us (leaders and members of the AECEO) have lived experiences. *Because* of this, we want to ensure a nuanced, relational approach to engaging with children and families is upheld where there may be concerns about sexual abuse. This is difficult, messy work, but necessary to ensure we are disrupting, rather than reinforcing, hegemonic power relations in society.