

# Exploring Trauma- & Violence- Informed Child Care

**Insights from an Exploratory Study**

A RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Trauma- and Violence-Informed Child Care

Early learning and child care (ELCC) programs and spaces in British Columbia and Canada strive to be inclusive of and responsive to the diversity of communities in which they are located and the families and children accessing their programs. Increasing awareness about the prevalence and impacts of trauma, family violence, and adversity in early childhood has generated attention on **trauma-informed and trauma- and violence-informed approaches** to early years programs (Bartlett et al., 2017; Lalonde et al., 2020; Ministry of Children & Family Development, 2017). These approaches are becoming integral to many child care programs including programs designed specifically for Indigenous communities and families. However, there remains a lack of evidence in Canada on what it means to take up and embed these approaches into routine child care programming (Slemon et al., under review).

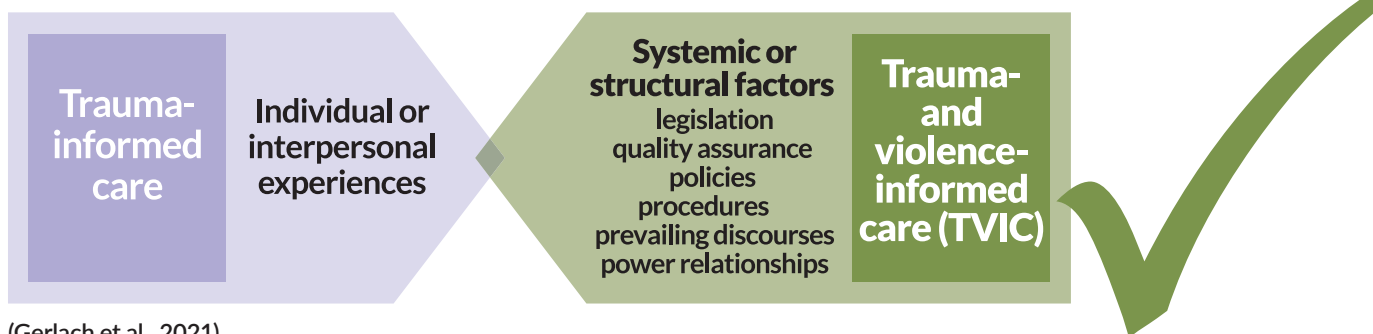
**Trauma-informed care (TIC)** has been defined as an approach to service delivery that centres trauma awareness and knowledge, its prevalence, and impacts to everyday life. TIC approaches primarily respond to the effects of trauma, ensure safety, build resilience, and prevent re-traumatization to support children and families who have faced traumatic experiences.

TIC tends to focus on trauma experiences and intervention at the level of an individual child and disregard how children's experiences are compounded by and continuous with broader structural forms of trauma and violence that are beyond a child or family's immediate environment and control (Gerlach, Browne, Sinha et al., 2017).. In the context of ELCC programs, this individualistic understanding of trauma

often translates into targeting individual children's responses to stress and trauma (Slemon et al., under review).

Trauma- and violence-informed care (TVIC) takes a broader perspective of, and approach to trauma; attending to how some children and families can experience interpersonal family violence, AND/OR structural and colonial forms of violence and trauma, such as systemic discriminatory practices and policies (Representative for Children and Youth, 2024). This broader understanding of trauma requires identifying and transforming taken-for-granted early childhood discourses, policies, practices etc., such as those inherent in the child welfare system, that can, albeit unintentionally, cause harm and trauma for specific child populations while sparing others (Gerlach et al., 2017).

Thus trauma- and violence-informed child care, or **TVICC**, addresses children's individual experiences of trauma while also paying attention to the wider systems that interact and play a role in families and children's lives. This understanding of trauma as structural and societal results in a critical examination of the harms, inequities, and exclusions that systems like the child care, educational, health care, child welfare, and familial and cultural structures, amongst others, may be perpetuating (Gerlach et al., 2017). TVICC involves an organizational change process that aims to move beyond a sole focus on children in a program, to a critical examination of broader factors including child care legislation, policies, quality assurance, dominant discourses, and power relations.



(Gerlach et al., 2021)

## Background to this Research

**Research partnership** – In 2020, a research partnership was formed between researchers at the University of Victoria and the leadership of the Victoria Social Innovation Centre located in Greater Victoria that hosts a range of non-profit organizations including **Family Services of Greater Victoria** and the **Victoria Immigrant and Refugee Centre**. This partnership and subsequent funding from the **Victoria Foundation** led to the co-development of a research project that aimed to inform the development of a yet to be built 'Little Phoenix' child care program in the Victoria Social Innovation Centre. An explicit goal identified by the Centre leadership was that this program would be trauma-informed. Through the research partnership it was agreed that the research would focus specifically on exploring TVICC.

**Research question** – This research was guided by the following question: *What does it mean to provide an early learning and child care program that is trauma- and- violence-informed?*

**Research process** – The research started in 2020 and continued after the **Little Phoenix program** opened in 2022. The research concluded in 2024. Multiple factors – including fundraising to cover increasing building delays and costs of the Little Phoenix, the COVID-19 pandemic, early childhood educator (ECE) recruitment and retention challenges, and changes within the research team – led to this project evolving over a period of several years. The research ultimately engaged with a total of 22 participants: 14 ECEs and child care managers and 8 parents. Additionally, fieldnotes were kept over the course of the research. The research process is summarized in Figure 1.

**Research participants** – Prior to the Little Phoenix program opening, researchers undertook semi-structured focus groups<sup>1</sup> over Zoom with 12 female ECEs who had a shared interest in TVICC. ECE participants had a wide range of experiences ranging from recently licensed educators to child care managers with decades of experience including in child care programs specifically for structurally marginalized families in different parts of BC and one program in Alberta. Five of the educators self-identified as Indigenous<sup>2</sup> with experience in providing and/or managing child care programs with primarily Indigenous families. As a result of the research partnership with the Little Phoenix program, researchers spent time in the program observing and engaging with educators and children and undertook in-person individual interviews with 2 of the educators and a focus group and walk-through of this program with 8 parents<sup>3</sup> whose children were attending the program.

**Research findings** – This report summarizes the findings from the focus groups and interviews with a diverse group of ECEs and child care managers and with ECEs and parents of children attending the Little Phoenix at the time this research took place.

<sup>1</sup> See Appendices for the interview guides used with ECE and parent participants.

<sup>2</sup> In the findings, all quotes in green are from Indigenous ECE participants to help distinguish the distinct perspectives that these participants shared and in recognition that many Indigenous early years and child care programs are implicitly trauma-informed.

<sup>3</sup> Parent participants included 2 fathers and 6 mothers; 2 self-identified as South East Asian, 1 as First Nation, and 4 as 'White' with ages ranging from 24 to 40 years old. All parents had 1 child attending the Little Phoenix program at the time of this research.

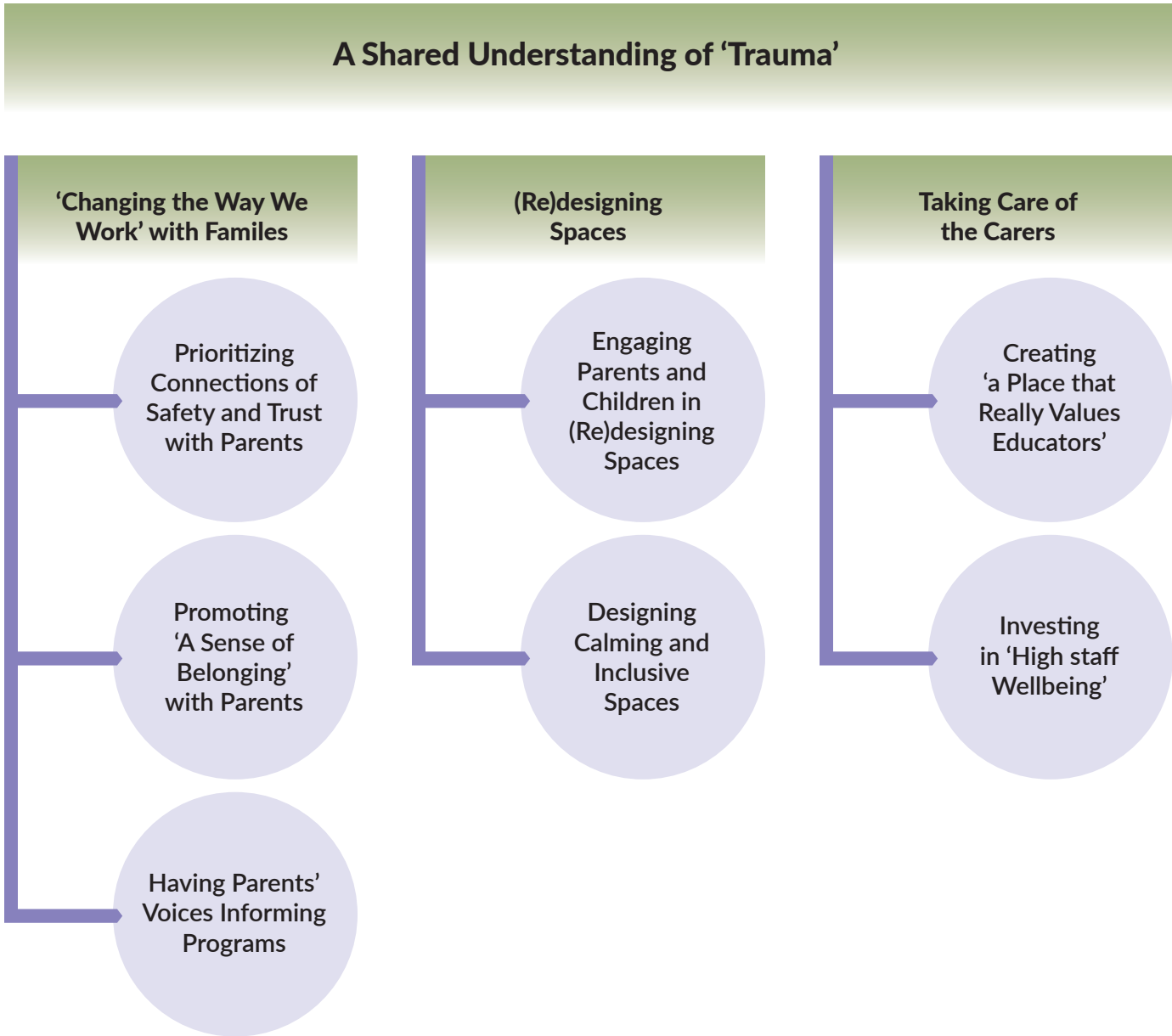


# SECTION II FINDINGS

The community-engaged research approaches employed in this research view research participants as knowledge keepers and equal partners in the research process. The research findings are therefore not solely the result of focus group discussions, but also include discussions held in staff meetings and

interactive workshops at the Little Phoenix program that were facilitated by the research team.

The findings are organized into four main themes and inter-related subthemes as outlined in the following visual:



## A Shared Understanding of ‘Trauma’

Understandings of trauma deeply influence the intention and nature of responsive care. During this research, some of the ECE research participants and members of the research team attended a workshop that promoted individualistic understandings of trauma as being primarily focused on addressing children’s ‘dysregulation’. The importance of attending to children’s individual needs also came through in focus groups with ECEs – exemplified by the following participant who talked about being ‘gentle and intentional’ and focusing on ‘making [children] feel safe, and being sensitive to their sensory needs and preferences:

*ECE: Well to me I think it means like sort of just the approach you take with kids, being very sort of gentle and intentional and, yes... I think that it helps them kind of develop like healthy coping mechanisms especially if they’ve had trauma in their lives and like sort of modelling for them how they can behave and react to things and also, you’re making them to feel safe... I’ve noticed, for example, I’ve noticed this child always goes over to the chalkboard alone and it seems to soothe him so I’m gonna make sure this board is clean and nice fresh chalk, right, make it very healing as an option.*

However, as noted in the following fieldnote, some educators identified the need to move beyond such individualistic understandings of trauma. The following is a fieldnote following attendance at the aforementioned workshop:

Fieldnote: During this workshop, an ECE critiqued normative ways of providing trauma-informed care as being centered on a Northern and Western philosophy, that was more “linear” without embracing other perspectives. This ECE then went on to suggest that within a psychological approach to trauma, “the individual becomes the problem, rather than the structures that trigger trauma responses”... and that “our systems are not set up to address the underlying trauma that actually drives these responses”.

These differing perspectives of trauma highlight the need for educators to have a shared program- and/or centre-wide philosophy about what it means to be trauma- and violence-informed as evident in the following quotes from two ECE research participants in centres advancing this approach:

*ECE: When we started we actually worked together to develop a philosophy and an approach, a way of working and we go back to that every year and look at how we’re doing it or not doing it, what do we need to change, what do we think about it.*

Having a shared philosophy where all educators in a program are on the same page in understanding trauma and trauma-informed practice requires ongoing attention particularly as new educators join a program:

*ECE: If you do have educators turning over quite a bit then there’s a lot of this walking back and forth because we might be trying to follow a philosophy but then everybody has their own personal philosophy... So that to me is a really key thing to work on in terms of establishing a program.*

Educators who were Indigenous were more likely to be consistent in applying a trauma-and violence-informed lens (though they did not label it as such), recognizing how colonial forms of trauma and violence could be manifested in young children’s behavior – especially when children were new to the program:

*<sup>4</sup>ECE: It is especially important when the child enters the program and especially if they’re coming with trauma is to recognize that some of their behaviors are a result of that trauma and to be open... give them their space, [and] not to treat their behaviors as something that has to be punished.*

*ECE: I just heard a story from a student about a new little girl who came in and started to hit the staff right away on the first day and in this case it was okay for them to be able to just sit there and hold the child for a good 20 minutes just to let her know that she was safe and cared for.*

<sup>4</sup> Green font denotes that ECE participants self-identified as Indigenous.

As noted in the following fieldnote, the 'source of trauma' does not have to be known for educators to move beyond a sole focus on a child's behaviour:

Fieldnote: A staff member [at Little Phoenix] shared that when two children who were refugees from Syria first arrived at the centre [where they worked previously], they both cried at the same time every day. She reflected on the source of trauma being unknown, though it was evidence that this was a trauma response: *"these kinds of things that are a mystery, but you know something's there."* She further described that they were only consolable by being rocked and not spoken to, and that it was important for staff to provide nurturing even if they didn't understand the causes of trauma.

Understanding children's behavior as expressions of trauma and responding accordingly may require some educators to 'revisit' and rethink their taken-for-granted ways of thinking and responding. As one ECE reflected: *"A lot of time even in ECE they say... these are the rules, be gentle but be firm [but] in trauma informed work we need to revisit these ideas and this kind of thinking"*.

This data points to how implementing TVICC requires that everyone in a program and/or centre have a shared mindset about a broad understanding of trauma that includes how broader social factors and 'systems of care' can result in children and families' ongoing experiences of trauma and harm.

## ‘Changing the Way We Work’ with Families

Consistent with an understanding that children’s health and wellbeing are inseparable from the broader context of their families’ lives (McCarry et al., 2021), most of the data signified an intentional shift beyond a sole focus on caring for ‘the child’ towards a broadening of practice-as-usual that extended to a focus on engaging with families and specifically parents<sup>5</sup>. This broader scope was documented in the following fieldnote:

Fieldnote: Some staff members [in the Little Phoenix] noted that while other ECEs centre around the child or the nuclear family only, [their program] focuses on the extended family, and that “the child doesn’t come as a separate entity”... Staff reflected on [how] this research provided an opportunity to “do things differently” and “form a culture” around trauma-informed care.

Most data generated by this research emphasized that intentionally engaging with parents and family members was integral to a trauma-and-violence informed approach and was captured in the overarching theme of ‘changing the way we work with families’, with three inter-related subthemes: (1) prioritizing connections of safety and trust with parents; (2) promoting ‘a sense of belonging’ with parents, and (3) having parents’ voices informing programs.

### Prioritizing Connections of Safety and Trust with Parents

A recurring subtheme in the data on ‘changing the way we work with families’ was an explicit focus on practices aimed at creating a sense of trust and safety for parents in their relationships with educators. This required letting the parents, not the rules and regulations of the center, take the lead on what was comfortable for them, including sharing information about their children and families. A discussion in one of the ECE focus group highlighted tangible ways of nurturing a sense of safety and trust for parents in initial meetings by shifting the focus away from asking lots of questions and completing paperwork and onto ‘making connections’:

ECE: *We learned pretty quickly that the way into our philosophy on child care was through developing a trusting relationship with the parents... Your relationship with the family is your way into the child and helping that family using the loving, trusting relationship with them, welcoming them in, having them sit in, offering tea, cheese and crackers.*

ECE: *The most important thing is making connections with the families... I just think it’s really just trying to be as welcoming as possible... kind of letting things organically build is how I feel comfortable.*

Findings highlight that TVIC involves educators recognizing that asking parents questions may bring up challenging experiences and contexts that a family is facing, which they may not yet feel comfortable discussing:

ECE: *I think it’s so important to make relationships first and I know there is definitely paperwork and all those kinds of things but I think it’s mainly using your best judgment and not pushing or really just looking at [the parents’] faces, feeling the energy, [ask yourself]: “are you pushing too much into an area that they don’t want to go into?”. And that’s kind of hard to say because it’s not something that you can always just have written down... But I think just being really, really focused on not being pushy I think is something that I would feel [is important]. Especially... if it’s a trauma informed center where [parents] kind of know that maybe they’re goanna be asked to share too much. I think just being really aware of letting people guide where the conversation goes and really letting them feel like they’re in the driver’s seat is what I would feel comfortable with.*

Delaying asking lots of questions on intake was also suggested by one of the parents who suggested: “Maybe like a three or six month follow up. Like, how are things going? Is there anything you want to share with us so we can better take care of your loved one?”

<sup>5</sup> The researchers use the term ‘parent’ for brevity in this report and understand that this term is inclusive of a child’s primary caregiver or guardian who may be an extended kin or family member.

Fostering relationships of safety and trust with parents required educators to be nonjudgemental and flexible in their expectations of families:

*ECE: How do you make it comfortable for families? I think it goes back again to the staff. Having a very welcoming staff and even if a child comes in at two o'clock in the afternoon we say 'it's great to see you', not 'your child has missed the morning and it's gonna be hard for them'. We just don't see it in that way. When you turn your perspective somehow, you want it to work for the family and the more you extend that relationship to the family you'll see that they will start coming earlier because they want to be there.*

Many child care programs have strict policies about children arriving at a specific time. However, as evident in the above quote – prioritizing relations of safety and trust with parents, may require policies as well as practices to be revisited and revised.

Drawing on a trauma and violence perspective requires paying attention to historical relationships between authority figures and families that may have been discriminatory and highlights the understandable mistrust that can exist between families and child-related programs and systems, as is the case with many Indigenous and refugee families (Gerlach, Browne, Sinha, et al., 2017; Moosa-Mitha, 2021). In the focus groups with Indigenous ECEs, participants identified creating connections with parents in their own environment as a priority:

*ECE: We sometimes meet families in community so [we ask parents]: 'Do you want to meet at Tim Hortons? Do you feel comfortable meeting out in community or at the park?'. But if they do come to the office, we offer them coffee or tea and usually the environment that we're in has comfy couches and it [doesn't look like we'd tell parents]: 'I'm gonna sit you at this desk and ask you a bunch of questions'.*

This educator also shared how they “*stayed closely connected with families*”:

*ECE: Every Friday morning, we would set a standard breakfast for families which was an open invitation and I mean we never got every single family in the center coming in but most weeks we'd get two to three families that could come in and sit down and have breakfast with their child, with the program staff. It's fairly quiet at that time so that was really how we stayed closely connected with families.*

Completing paperwork on intake is a routine policy and practice in child care settings. In response to the concerns that Indigenous families can have about filling in forms and sharing information about their child and family (Gerlach, Browne, Sinha, et al., 2017), an Indigenous ECE also highlighted the importance of “*decolonizing all of their paperwork*” by:

*ECE: Adding Indigenous ways of being and doing into those forms even if that's something as simple as the First Nations people if it's specific to a certain reserve adding something from their area. All our forms have [name of Indigenous centre] logo; adds a little comfort. And putting words in it like a quote from an Indigenous book or maybe a word like [traditional language] which means respect. Yes, just making [the forms] more inviting.*

This ECE went onto add that they had also removed questions about “*gender and knowing your status card number because those are often sensitive topics... If we need to know later... we ask them then as opposed to asking them all these questions at the get go on an intake form*”. This ECE also highlighted how they attended to what parents needed beyond child care in seeking supports for their family as a whole and taking into account families’ values and world views:

*ECE: We also at intake do a holistic wheel where a parent can talk about things that the child needs, but also talk about things that the parent might need as well... And then the holistic wheel will be revisited halfway through the program... There's been things like self-care for parents, [like] “I want to like get out for more walks” or just different things like that. And we try to find a way to support them in whatever way we can.*

A primary concern for child-related programs with Indigenous communities and families is time for fostering genuine relationships of safety and trust in response to their histories and ongoing high rates of children being removed from their care by the child welfare system (Fallon et al., 2021). In this context, an Indigenous ECE highlighted the importance of transparency in navigating this tricky dynamic: *“We have a pretty close relationship with [MCFD] already. But it can be tricky. You don’t want to over share to child agencies in your report”*. This ECE went onto discuss how they aimed to mitigate damaging their relationships with parents while managing their ‘duty to report’: *“You have to be honest, you have to tell them what you have to do. They have to know right from the beginning that there’s a line that you shouldn’t cross because the children are the vulnerable beings. I know it’s really difficult sometimes”*.

Another ECE added:

*ECE: There’s a family that I can think of that I had to go over to her house and explain [that] ‘I’ve tried this and this and I feel terrible but I feel a duty to report, it would be better if it came from you, is there any way that I can support you to make this phone call?’. She didn’t want to and I did end up having to call. But we have a relationship today with this family because I think I was transparent. It took some time but I think that was a bit of a better approach than to make the phone call [without informing them first]. I think another thing I don’t know how much training there is for ECEs around this now but I think we need to do some education around how to approach this in a less harmful way. There needs to be some strict policies in who will make phone calls and who do you discuss this with prior to making the phone call. Because there are those rogue kind of phone calls going in about families.*

However, there was also evidence that broadening routine practices in ‘changing the way we work with families’ may require ECEs to learn about how to navigate, as one ECE said: *“interpersonal relationship with families... And so I think it definitely [requires] skill and training”*. ECE participants emphasized the importance of *“learning and growing together”* that involved educators, leadership, and organizational supports:

*ECE: Learning and growing together... To reflect, inquire and continuously learn to improve our ability to develop, sensitive, caring, responsive and attuned relationships with the children and their families as per the trauma-informed approach that informs our practice.*

*ECE: A willingness to keep learning and to not really take on the position of hierarchy, being on the floor, I think that’s a big issue with a lot of leadership. They are not really on the floor so they don’t get to see what’s going on.*

The data in this subtheme points to an intentional relationship-focused approach that prioritizes parents’ sense of safety and trust in connecting with child care staff, by changing how the child care center as a system works by ‘doing things differently’ in ways that are highly consistent with TVIC (EQUIP Health Care, 2021a; Howard, 2018; MCFD, 2016; SAMHSA, 2014).

### Promoting ‘A Sense of Belonging’ with Parents

In ‘doing things differently with families’, and closely connected to data in the previous subtheme, is an intentional focus on strategies that promoted parents’ sense of acceptance and belonging in child care programs that goes beyond dropping off and picking up their children. As one parent stated: *“for the trauma informed care piece that’s a sense of belonging, it’s very important, ‘these are your people, you belong here”*.

For the parents in the focus group, this was the first opportunity they had had to come together as a group of parents whose children were all attending the Little Phoenix program, and they expressed a desire to have more opportunities to get to know each other and their children:

*Parent: Having more opportunities to meet and connect with the parents. I don’t know any of the students or parents. Some of the kids come and talk to me, right, when I’m there for pick-up or drop-off, and I don’t know their names. I would like to know more about [child]’s peers.*

<sup>6</sup> Purple text is used to clearly show when quotes are from parent participants.

Another parent suggested that parents could share an optional 'small bio' about their family and their child(ren) attending the program to "create stronger relationships":

*Parent: I think one thing that would be incredibly helpful is... knowing more about the families and the kids that our little ones are interacting with. I don't really know anything about any of the kids, you know, anybody's background... I'm not talking about anything super personal, but it'd be nice to have a small bio of the families to understand maybe your culture, or where you come from, or your family dynamics so when we meet each other in the hall, we have a better understanding and so we also be more respectful of each other and also be more informed, you know. So, I think... just trying to create a stronger relationship and more information so if our kids come home and have a questions, we can also have the answers to help them understand.*

Other suggestions from parents that highlighted the need to create a sense of community amongst parents included having a buy and sell Facebook page or bulletin board in the program entry way for children's clothes, and once a month "cultural weeks of different kinds of food" where each family share a food item typical to their family.

Creating a program culture of acceptance and belonging was also echoed by ECE participants:

*ECE: And so how can we make a space comfortable for every kind of family. I think in a trauma informed center... not necessarily all families but many of them will [be coming from a place of trauma] because of circumstances that have come about in their lives but not everybody. So, we need to find ways to help parents to be accepting of each other [and other] families too.*

Several ECEs shared experiences of parents spending time and 'just being' in their children's child care programs:

*ECE: I just wanted to echo everyone... about having those events and bringing families, inviting families to do the events. One thing that I experienced was having parents volunteering in the center once a week, twice a week or just having this option that you can come and just be there.*

*ECE: There was like a parent's night where the parents would come, and all hang out together with the educators and in the actual center so that the parents could learn a bit more about what it was like to be in that center... And I found for myself as an educator that it created a different relationship with the parents in talking to them one on one like you stay in touch with them in the hallway or in the room and talking, I found for them that those events changed the relationship in a good way between the parents and the [staff].*

ECE participants also talked about the importance of understanding the context of families' lives, and shifting away from educators being 'the expert' and towards an intentional focus on creating a culture of acceptance:

*ECE: I know one thing we want to do is kind of learn more about all the different cultures and diversity that we have at our center and just sort of honor those a little bit better. We have a lot of kids who are Muslim and so they celebrate like totally different holidays than the regular white North American holidays. So, yeah, just like to learn more about that and maybe a little bit more about like the languages that they speak, we have a lot of language diversity.*

*ECE: If you're working with a population that's new to Canada, if they face some of those barriers to health and wellbeing, food security is probably a reality... So, we do offer breakfast every day. It doesn't have to be complicated, but they can come in and there's free access to cereal, some days they get eggs and bacon but most days it's bagels and fruit... I think that's a pretty crucial component of a trauma sensitive program.*

An intentional focus on creating 'a space comfortable for every kind of family' was also taken up by Indigenous ECE participants:

*ECE: How can we make a space comfortable for every kind of family. We've been talking mostly about families who may live in poverty but... in a trauma informed center not necessarily all families live in poverty but many of them will [be coming from a place of trauma] because of circumstances that have come about in their lives but not everybody. So, we need to find ways to help parents to be accepting of each other [and other] families too... We offer respect to everybody. That would be a teaching [moment] with our little people. I would have similar expectations of the parents in a compassionate and empathetic way, understanding the context of where they may be coming from. I think we have to be clear with boundaries around that and offer information as opposed to being the expert.*

Indigenous ECEs further added how they welcomed families and promoted a sense of belonging:

*ECE: One of the things that we do at the start of the year is almost like the self-locator and we call them 'family banners' and we get the families to put up a picture of their family and talk about their nation and it's kind of a way for them and their children to be proud of their heritage.*

*ECE: Having a representation of the traditional territory that the center is on and land acknowledgement is really important. As well as maybe some pictures and just something that represents the traditional territory that you're on. But also, to show that you care enough to know those things. And I feel like that would help a family to feel like, 'oh wow, these people really care about this'.*

Indigenous ECEs also shared that in their programs it was important to have a comfortable “family room” or space in programs where parents could hang out, grab a coffee, and connect with other parents, educators, support workers, and Elders:

*ECE: We have a community room that can be booked... We have coffee and some light snacks. There's a couple couches that are usually empty unless somebody has booked them and we can go into smaller rooms if we want to book a meeting room, let's say you're a child support worker or you need somebody to talk about anything from housing to finances. And it's been really successful for Elders, other children and it really creates a sense of community. I think it's been really nice.*

Several participants talked about wanting or having Indigenous Elders connected and involved with their programs on an ongoing basis as being central for Indigenous families in their programs and to be respectful of the traditional territories on which their programs were located:

*Parents: We're on the unceded territory of First Nations but there's nothing in the program that speaks to that right now.*

*ECE: I think that [having an Elder in a program] is really important and I think that one of the things that I think about when I think about reconciliation is how can non-Indigenous centers work to make those changes...*

*ECE: I think that there's no better way to honor the people whose territory you're on by reaching out and making more connections. When I think about Elders that have been at the centers that I've worked at they really bring about a lot of peace to the center.*

Central to an ethos of belonging is a sense of acceptance, that you do not have to change who you are to be accepted (Long & Guo, 2023). Aligned with broader understandings of trauma as related to structural and colonial violence, this data highlights an important shift in practice beyond relational practices with individual parents to include an intentional focus on creating a program-wide culture of welcome, comfort, and belonging for all families. Actively promoting a sense of belong and comfort in child care programs for all families requires that programs are inclusive of and responsive to the social, cultural, and historical contexts of families and communities' lives (Lalonde et al., 2020; Ministry of Children & Family Development, 2017; SAMHSA, 2014).

## Having Parents' Voices Informing Programs

Related to creating child care spaces in which parents feel safe and a sense of belonging, was data from parent and ECE participants that emphasized the importance of having mechanisms in place so that parents had voice and visibility in their children's programs. As evident in the following discussion, for the parents who participated in this study, they valued having a safe space in which they could come together and share their ideas about their child care program:

*Parents: The [focus group] meeting was needed I'd say... What happens is like this is a safe environment for us to share our views and what we feel that can improve the institution and how it can help our kids... For me especially cause [partner] does the whole organizing the daycare stuff, pick up and drop off this gives me more open mindedness about the centre itself and its approach... I really like that you guys called us here to do this meeting and you guys are looking for ways to improve and like you said it's ongoing discussions, it's not just one discussion, and that's great... Like I said it comes down to communication... I think that these meetings are a great way for us to all, kind of, move forward together.*

*“Learning from parents all the time” and wanting “to be together as a team” was also a recurring theme taken up by the ECE participants who identified parents’ “choice and voice” in programming as integral to trauma-informed practice: “On the part of the families and giving them choices and voice and how in some of the activities [we are] encouraging them to share things if they’re able to. Getting their opinions on what’s happening daily”.*

Building parents’ voices into policies was also noted as a common feature of Indigenous programs, as an Indigenous ECE noted: *“Have parent advisory circles of parents that do just that. They work with the program and advise it”.* Another Indigenous ECE advised:

*ECE: In your policies and procedures, when a family joins the center maybe there needs to be a conversation at that time about where the parents are at, the expectations of the parents and the expectations of the center and come to, I guess an agreement not a contract about how they will interact with each other in respectful ways [and]... having the parent’s voice included so if they have some power over their own actions right from the beginning.*

Prior literature on TVIC asserts that *“traumatic events by their very nature set up a power differential where one entity (whether an individual, an event, or a force of nature) has power over another”* (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 8). The data in the subtheme of ‘having parents’ voices in programs’ speaks to TVIC involving power sharing and reciprocal learning relationships between educators and parents. Parental voices are key to ensuring that programs are informed of and responsive to their ideas, preferences, and needs (Clervil et al., 2013; SAMHSA, 2014). This shift also disrupts the tendency of child care programs to have ‘inequitable family-professional decision-making’ and affirms parental self-efficacy in knowing what works best for them and their children (Hancock & Morgan, 2024). Parental voice in the environmental design of child care programs is explored in a subsequent theme.

Overall, the above data captured in ‘doing things differently with families’ conveys a shared organizational and program-wide philosophical approach to TVICC in which care is extended beyond a focus on the child to intentional relationship-focused practices for and with parents and at program-wide organizational levels in creating a culture of safety and belonging (Bartlett et al., 2017; Child Care Resources Inc. & United Way of Central Carolinas, 2019; Loomis, 2018). Implicit in this approach are shifts in empowering parents in their relationships and engagement with child care programs (Bartlett et al., 2017).

## (Re)designing Spaces

Trauma- and violence-informed design assumes that the design of spaces and structures can influence behaviors, emotions, identities, and a sense of dignity and worth. Further, the design of spaces can reduce re-traumatization and promote healing (Committee on Temporary Shelter, 2018). There was a significant amount of data generated on the theme of '(re)designing space' that is organized into two subthemes: (1) engaging parents and children in (re)designing spaces, and (2) creating calming and inclusive spaces.

### Engaging Parents and Children in (Re)designing Spaces

As noted in the previous theme, participants reflected on the need for mechanisms for parents to provide input on their child care programs. In this research, parent participants provided their feedback on their child care space [the Little Phoenix] while doing a group walk through and recorded discussion:

Fieldnote: The walk-through activity was very effective at generating parents' ideas of the various spaces and their experiences which centred mainly around drop off and pick up often in the hallway and they all expressed an interest in addressing this and making greater use of the entry room.

When standing in the entry way of the program, parents talked about how this space constrained their ability to "stick around" or "have conversation with the educator, or the parents":

Parents: *I do find like when we do drop offs and pick-ups and there's so much overlap between the parents. There's a lot of meeting in the stairwell and feeling like that... there's not enough space for us to stick around and have a conversation. I feel like I have to do pick up really quick and get out of the way. If we were able to come in here to have more space to say goodbye or to have a conversation with the educator, or the parents. I feel like there's not enough space. I feel rushed.*

Another parent raised the importance of having thoughtful "transition spaces" during drop offs and pick-ups which can be emotional for both children and parents:

Parent: *That transition space would be really nice because it's so hard to go from your home, even for us, to go from home to work. It's like, sometimes our cars are a transition space, sometimes a locker room is our transition space.. But having a safe space for [children] to come in, you can sit, say goodbye, take their rain boots off, and then they can be welcomed by their educators and then take a deep breath and then walk in and see the other kids.*

More broadly, participants talked about redesigning child care spaces with children. One parent highlighted the importance of changing the child care environment to prepare their child for changes in their life "as they grow up":

Parent: *At the same time if the arrangement is in a way where they can make shifts, like they can change the layout often, maybe a fortnight or a month. What happens is like it keeps the interest among the kids, that you know, now I want to explore this.. or even if things are same, it's just changing the layout.*

In response, the interviewer questioned the need for children to have a predictable environment, and another parent added:

Parent: *There should definitely be a balance for a period. But the point is if we are not giving this opportunity for them to experience that change is something which is inevitable, growing up they would find it even more challenging if they see systems so robust that they do not change at all.*

Involving children in the redesign of their child care space was also brought up by ECEs:

ECE: *We shifted the baby's space so they were all more mobile and one of the babies woke up and... we brought her out and she burst into tears. And it took us a while to figure out that what was upsetting her was [that] we had changed the environment. So, we changed it back but the next day we did do it with her awake. ... she was okay then. It was waking up to something that was different.*

Another ECE noted that “You have to be also very observant. And include [children] in those changes and be very observant to those that are so sensitive to it and need more consistency”.

ECE: *We designed our whole outside playground with one- to three-year-olds at our center. One of the early childhood educators took that on and it was an amazing exercise and she documented it and we tried to do as much as we could in terms of their input... the kids really told us what they loved and what they didn't like, I mean two-year-olds can give you a lot of information.*

This data highlights the importance of educators engaging with children and parents in the (re)design of their physical environment and attending to how the design and use of spaces can invite or constrain parents in ‘sticking around’ and feeling like they also belong in the program. Based on this understanding, the importance of inclusionary physical space and not just inclusionary practices and policies is highlighted as important to providing TVICC.

## Designing Calming and Inclusive Spaces

When the physical environment of child care programs are designed from a trauma-and violence- informed orientation, they foster safety and avoid design features that risk retraumatizing children (Child Care Resources Inc. & United Way of Central Carolinas, 2019; Henderson, 2017). This can include how the choice of dominant colors can be experienced depending on families’ sociocultural, geographical contexts, and personal experiences and histories (Berens, 2017). As one ECE noted: “We’ve definitely tried to keep the stimulation pretty neutral in most of the space, like the whole walls are neutral, there’s not a lot of clutter, things are presented on the walls, they’re presented quite beautifully of the children’s work and things like that”. The effects of the physical child care environment on children and families is something that Indigenous programs have put thought into, as evident in the following quotes:

ECE: *I think about what the environment looks like, I feel like a lot of centers where you have trauma or not can be very bright and busy and can give anyone anxiety. Really. I think if it’s a trauma [-informed center], an area where you know that there’s going to be people coming in with a little bit extra trauma possibly, [the place should be] a calming environment and have different sections where it’s not just such an open space where you can see the person way from across the room.*

Participants highlighted the sensory nature of child care spaces and the importance of designing “a calming environment” and having designated “quiet areas” particularly for children who as one parent described get “over-stimulated really easily”.

ECE: *I think about a space that is sensory informed. There is a focus on attention for what the sensory experiences of the children are and trying to perhaps see it from the children’s perspective... So, for example, the amount of light that might be available to them in the space and whether there are spaces that have less light or more light. Sound and being aware of where the sound is coming from and how it feels. And most of all the sense of movement that’s going on within the room. How is that room laid out in terms of the way the children are engaging with it and what’s happening and how do the educators navigate the space because I think that the volume of movement [is important] on a very internal level.*

ECE: *We have tents. Tents for if you need to go by yourself to self-regulate. It’s big enough that if they have a support worker the support worker can go in with them if it’s required by, yeah, that tent is probably a big hit... Yes sensory spaces are great. If you can have a quiet cushy corner for kids to come in. One of the things we’re working on is a light room so it’s our nap room but when it’s not being used as a nap room, we’ll set it up as a light and shadow room with some pretty [material]. The light tables are great, those are quite costly but things like a projector, an old school projector if we can find one. Things for children to make shadow puppets can be very calming.*

In keeping with a trauma-informed orientation to designing child care environments (Henderson, 2017; Schwartz-Henderson, 2016), this data points to the careful design of calming and stress-free child care environments, in which families have a place to meet, and that is inclusive of the diversity of families' sociocultural contexts, experiences, and histories (Clervil et al., 2013).

The participants in this research were all located in an urban centre and there was discussion about children having access to nature and the calming effects of "bringing the outside in" which has also been noted in the literature (Bartlett et al., 2017). As one parent highlighted during the walk through of Little Phoenix:

*Parents: I would like to have more nature stuff... that they can actually interact with, rather than just plants off to the side. That would be really neat... I like how there's there's like a lot of natural light in there... Well, the colors really matter to me. I think a lot of natural materials. I feel like you can't really go wrong with natural, natural looking [material], looking like nature. Representing the outside inside, I feel is calming for me personally. I can't speak for everyone.. I agree. I really like the idea too of bringing the outside in and how that could look... I wish they had more garden spaces.*

In the two focus groups with Indigenous ECEs, the importance of ensuring that the indoor environment reflects nature was also raised:

*ECE: I would say [the physical environment] is extremely important... There are different philosophies and approaches that you can look at. Because it comes alongside Indigenous ways of being and nature ways of being.*

*ECEs: Bring the outdoors in with plants and rocks that aren't too big that [children] will trip on or shells or branches, I'm sure that there's a lot of other good suggestions... Yeah, that's probably one of your best ways is to make sure that the indoor environment reflects a nature based philosophy like [name] said bringing in all the natural elements and having them available to the children... We also have a garden space that's right beside the outside of our daycare here. It's pretty new, the kids really enjoy going there and showing them what vegetables to plant, how we take care of them, yes...*

Overall, the data in this theme, and consistent with the literature, reinforce how a trauma- and violence-informed orientation informs and shapes the physical design of child care spaces (Henderson, 2017).

## Taking Care of the Carers

Educators drew attention to how child care was located within a broader socio-political context in which their profession and contributions to society were undervalued. Participants consistently spoke to structural conditions in the broader ECE landscape in BC that constrained their work, including low wages, minimal vacation, and poor benefits. As one ECE reflected: *“because shock of shock early childhood education is not respected in our society... I mean there’s a whole bunch of ways that it tells me we don’t actually really respect what you do”*. Key factors in feeling undervalued included stressful working conditions, low pay, no benefits, and ratio expectations.

In reflecting on TVICC, ECEs consistently identified the importance of taking care of educators. This includes ensuring practices do not traumatize educators: *“I think, it’s important to not to re-traumatize not only children but also educators because it could happen really unintentionally... I think we need to be really cognizant of what practice is re-traumatizing”*.

The data in this final theme of ‘taking care of the carers’ is intricately tied to ECEs capacity to provide TVICC within a socio-political context that aids or limits the effectiveness of their care practices. This data is organized into two subthemes that are closely inter-related: (1) Creating ‘a place that really values educators’ and (2) Investing in ‘high staff wellbeing’.

### Creating ‘a Place that Really Values Educators’

In a sector in which educators spend *“their whole day caring for others”*, ECEs participants noted the importance of feeling appreciated and valued. As one ECE shared: *“I think that sometimes we forget about the educators and the fact they need also to be comfortable, and they need to feel like it’s a place for them”*. Valuing staff was identified as key to keeping staff, which is foundational for the relationship-focused nature of TVICC. Participants shared how keeping staff required concrete supports including supportive leadership:

ECE: *One of the things that’s really important... it’s leadership too that’s both respectful and responsive to the educators because she treats the educators the way that we want to treat the families and the children. And I think that that is such a key piece that that kind of respectful, responsive, sensitive, caring is part of the whole team. We do that for each other.*

Participants also identified how having scheduled paid time during regular hours for planning and staff meetings and having a supportive team approach with regular meetings and supervision *“that doesn’t involve overtime”* to debrief, can mitigate the effects of working in a challenging environment, and help to retain staff:

ECE: *It is tough, and it is challenging. I think one of those things that has really kept me at [place] because I’ve been there for six years now, is just having a supportive environment so we have supervision up to once a week or we can have supervision every other week so biweekly. And then we also do quarterly team building days where we are altogether and we’re doing something fun, we’re doing something cultural or our health and safety protocols. And so those types of things just really jump out at me. I feel like that brings us together in a really good way. I think obviously the support in terms of your own wellness is also really important. We have had days where we’ve gone on planned walks with local knowledge keepers, and we’ve done beach walks to collect shells for smudge purposes and just different things that kind of bring us together in a really positive and spiritual way at times. That’s really helped.*

ECE: *And one of those things that my manager has done a lot of was organizing team meetings so that we’re not just doing the weekly one on one supervision, we do biweekly team meetings where we’re all sitting together and talking about whatever it is that we need to and kind of regrouping. I think that that’s really important too; how you’re gonna bring your team together . . . And especially with a new team because, it doesn’t always work right and personalities clash and just thinking about ways in which that potential candidate might do that [is important].*

Also, and consistent with the decentering of power in a trauma- and violence-informed approach, ECEs described how feeling valued was attached to having a meaningful ‘voice in a center’:

*ECE: I feel like when you invest your time, and you feel like you have a voice in a center and your voice mattered I think that really [helped]. I mean it's more than just work and it's more than just a pay cheque, it's like "whoa, I'm coming to work because what I contribute to here matters".*

*ECE: Turnover in ECE job is really high and most of it, to me, is not only because of their low wages but also... really given space to make decisions and how much flexibility they're given... A place that really values educator's opinion, thinking. As long as really involve them in bigger decision makings, not only about the surrounding of the room and how can they change things around. What should be in the room, what can calm them, what can, should go or the rotations of material in the room. And also I'm just thinking in my head as I'm kind of recalling my experience another thing is also, ask them actually, have this session with ECEs to kind of communicate with them, what makes you, "you really [are] an invested educator in the room and how can we promote that?". We have a lot of educators that they're really burnt out, you know, how can we really stop that? So, I think, open and honest communication with the ECEs.*

As these findings highlight, intentional strategies, policies, and decisions that ensure ECEs are seen, valued, and respected sustain them in this field. Moreover, the valuing of educators, as it supports staff retention and continuity in relationships amongst staff and with parents and children, and which are central to TVICC, and push back against the tendency of neoliberal and capitalist politics that have historically undervalued the contributions of ECEs to our society (Eizadirad & Abawi, 2021).

## Investing in ‘High Staff Wellbeing’

The relationship between valuing educators and promoting staff wellbeing in providing TVICC was clear in the data and exemplified by the following ECEs: “I think if staff have high wellbeing, then it will contribute to their ability to provide trauma informed care. Because if people aren't feeling like they're respected at their job and obsessed with the way that they work with the kids.” Seemingly simple solutions can have a meaningful impact on staff feeling like they are “taken care of”:

*ECE: I have one quick idea also about the coffee breaks and lunch breaks. A proper place for staff to have their food. Sometimes you don't want to hear any more crying, or you really as an adult, [want] to be able to go back to that room [with] that open heart and open arms, you really need to be taken care of.*

ECEs described other strategies they had experienced or wanted to have to alleviate occupational stress, prevent burnout, and promote wellbeing. In recognizing the importance of “taking care of yourself” Indigenous ECEs shared how they had supportive organizational policies, including closing the program for staff “wellness activities”.

Indigenous ECEs added the following:

*ECE: On Fridays we close. Some days we do wellness activities as opposed to training and case management. So, one day we went or for half a day we went for a walk in the nature. It doesn't have to be really complicated but just recognizing and acknowledging the need to take care of yourself.*

*ECE: And then we're also able at the center that they give us an hour of paid time off the floor for planning. Also, she said if you had an hour of self-care this month just tell your mentor, and she'll add it to your pay cheque. I feel like they are kind of giving a little bit of extra push to give you... because there's a lot of stuff if you want to be doing planning or narrations or anything, it's a lot of your own time. And I think people feel really seen and respected as an educator when they're given a little bit of pay for that... So, I think that's really a nice touch at the [place] and it makes me feel special. And that's an hour a month for wellness. [We have] an hour a week for the planning, so whatever that planning looks like for you whether it's making a little narration or thinking about an exploration you want to do the next day, you can be reading an article. An hour a week is kind of to be focused for the [place] but it's kind of your own time. I think that's really unique, and I think that really makes me feel like I'm appreciated, my time is important.*

Educators are the heart of child care settings and the persons with whom children and families have the most contact. As evident in the above data, 'taking care of the carers' is essential for maintaining a stable workforce that can provide continuity in their relationships and care with families and children as central to a trauma-informed approach (Bartlett et al., 2017; Child Care Resources Inc. & United Way of Central Carolinas, 2019).

Working with children and families experiencing trauma can place child care staff at higher risk of vicarious trauma and burnout and result in high staff turnover. Consistent with existing evidence, this data shows that investing in 'high staff wellbeing' is a program-wide endeavour that requires organizational supports such as debriefing and reflective supervision. (Child Care Resources Inc. & United Way of Central Carolinas, 2019). These findings also point to the need to address an apparent tension between TVICC and the financial viability of programs in terms of staff ratios.

## SECTION III RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the findings of this research and are not an exhaustive list of recommendations for implementing TVICC. Please refer to the 'resources' in the appendices that help to inform further recommendations for implementing TVICC.

- **Create a shared philosophical approach** – For everyone involved in a centre/program to understand the prevalence of interpersonal and structural forms of trauma and violence; the need to shift beyond a sole focus 'on the child', and have a shared understanding and philosophical approach to working and caring for young children and their families – continually working towards a centre- or program-wide approach that is trauma- and violence-informed.
- **Review and revise existing childcare policies** – To examine whether taken for granted procedures and policies (such as 'intake' forms and questions; dropping a child off late) need to be revised with parental input to ensure that they are aligned with a program-wide culture of 'prioritizing connections of safety and trust with parents' and 'a sense of belonging' for all families.
- **Prioritize relationships in initial parent meetings** – To provide parents with the option of meeting for the first time at the centre/program or a local place of their choosing. At an initial meeting, the focus is on relationship building and the deferral of a lot of paperwork until a trusting relationship has been established.
- **Create opportunities for parents/siblings/extended family members to socialize** – Ask parents for their input on what/how/when they would like an opportunity to socialize and get to know other parents, children, and the staff in a relaxed social gathering in the program.
- **Provide a parent noticeboard** – Provide a parent-oriented noticeboard for parents and staff to provide information that could include local community events, children's clothes/toys for sale/donation.
- **Have a staff noticeboard** – To include a photo and short bio about each staff member and program information, events, themes, etc.
- **Invite parents' voices** – To establish a formal parent advisory circle/committee or provide regular opportunities throughout the year for parents to come together and have a voice in what is working well and suggestions for further improving the program including enhancing how the program can be further trauma- and violence-informed.
- **Involve parents and children in the (re) design of physical space** – To involve parents and children in any changes to the physical space, furniture arrangement, etc. For spaces to limit 'lots of clutter' and visual stimulation, include a quiet/calming space, natural elements – 'bringing the outside in'. Make changes to the physical space with children's input and during the time that they are present in the program so they can see what changes are taking place.
- **Attend to design of entry space** – To create a welcoming environment and physical space in which parents are able to 'hang around' and chat during drop-off and pick-up times with each other and staff. Involve parents in the design of such a space.
- **'Take care of the carers'** – The retention of staff is key to the relational practices that are at the core of TVICC. Based on this research, 'taking care of the carers' includes the following recommendations:
  - **New staff orientation** – To include an orientation to the program's shared TVIC approach to care.
  - **Professional development opportunities** – For all staff to increase their knowledge and capacity to provide TVICC by attending paid professional development opportunities related to trauma and TVIC approaches to care.
  - **Staff well-being** – Create a collaborative plan/system with staff to promote staff well-being (e.g. mentorship, coaching, scheduled breaks, leave policies, counselling, health benefits)
  - **Staff voice in program** – To create a work culture and environment in which there are regular opportunities for staff to have a genuine voice in programming.

# APPENDICES

## Interview Guides

### Interview Guide for ECE Participant Group (prior to Little Phoenix opening)

1. How do you define trauma?
2. When you think of a trauma-informed or a trauma- and violence-informed approach to child care –
  - a. What are your thoughts on what this approach looks like or could look like in a child care program?
  - b. What are your thoughts on some key components or features of this approach?
  - c. What are your thoughts on how can this approach support (i) infants and young children, and (ii) their caregivers/families?
3. How do you think a child care program based on this approach can make families and children feel comfortable, welcome and experience a sense of belonging?
4. What is needed for this approach to be implemented successfully within an early childhood program?
5. What do they think is important to consider in the physical/social space when designing a program like this?
  - a. How do you think the space can be responsive to children's needs?
  - b. How can the space be responsive to families' needs?
6. What do you think are some of the key qualities and qualifications of the staff that are hired to support and run a TVICC program?
  - a. What types of information or professional development/training do you think would be helpful for the staff?
  - b. What are some ways of supporting staff wellbeing?
7. Is there anything else you think it is important for us to consider or you would like to share?

### Interview Guide for Little Phoenix ECE Participant Group

1. When you think of 'trauma' in the context of families and young children, what comes to mind for you?
2. When you think of a trauma-informed or a trauma- and violence-informed approach to child care, what comes to mind?
  - a. What were your initial thoughts and assumptions?
  - b. Have these changed? Why? How?
3. In your experience, how has Little Phoenix responded to children's needs?
  - a. Families' needs?
4. What are some of the ways you feel Little Phoenix has implemented this approach?
5. What have been some of the challenges you have experienced in implementing this approach?
6. What in your view are some of the strengths of this approach?
7. In your experience, how has Little Phoenix responded to children's needs?
  - a. Families' needs?
8. If you could dream up a child care space that best meets the needs of children and families, what would it include?
  - a. Are there any supports or resources you can imagine that might be helpful?
  - b. Are there any particular considerations that an ideal child care centre could have for families who have experienced challenges such as poverty, difficulties finding housing, intergenerational trauma, violence, etc.?
9. Is there anything else you think it is important for us to consider or you would like to share?

## Guide for Parent Walk Through of Little Phoenix and Parent Focus Group

**Walk Through** – You have been coming here for a while now and we would like you to help us think about families coming here for the first time and how the building and program can be as welcoming as possible for you and your children.

1. Outside the entrance – What do you notice as you approach and enter the building? What things could be changed to make the space more welcoming?
2. Drop-off area inside – What makes parents feel welcomed and comfortable at drop off and pick up? What things could be changed to make the space more welcoming and give you and your family a sense of belonging in this program?
3. Main space inside and outside – How would you describe the feel of this space? What parts of this space do you think help your child to feel safe and calm?

## Focus Group with Parents

1. Can you tell us a little bit about how you ended up bringing your child to the Little Phoenix?
2. When you learnt that this program was aiming to be trauma-informed – what were your thoughts or feelings about this? What do you think is important for a program that wants to be trauma-informed?
3. What are some of the ways that Little Phoenix has supported your family as whole?
  - a. Your children?
  - b. You as a parent/caregiver?
4. If you could dream up a trauma-informed-child care program that best meets the needs of children and families, what would it include?
  - a. Are there any supports or resources you can imagine that might be helpful?
  - b. Are there opportunities for you to get to know other parents?
5. Is there anything else you think it is important for us to consider or you would like to share?

## Suggested Resources

In addition to the references cited in this research summary, the following may also be helpful:

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