

Early Childhood Professional Well-Being: An Ecological Framework



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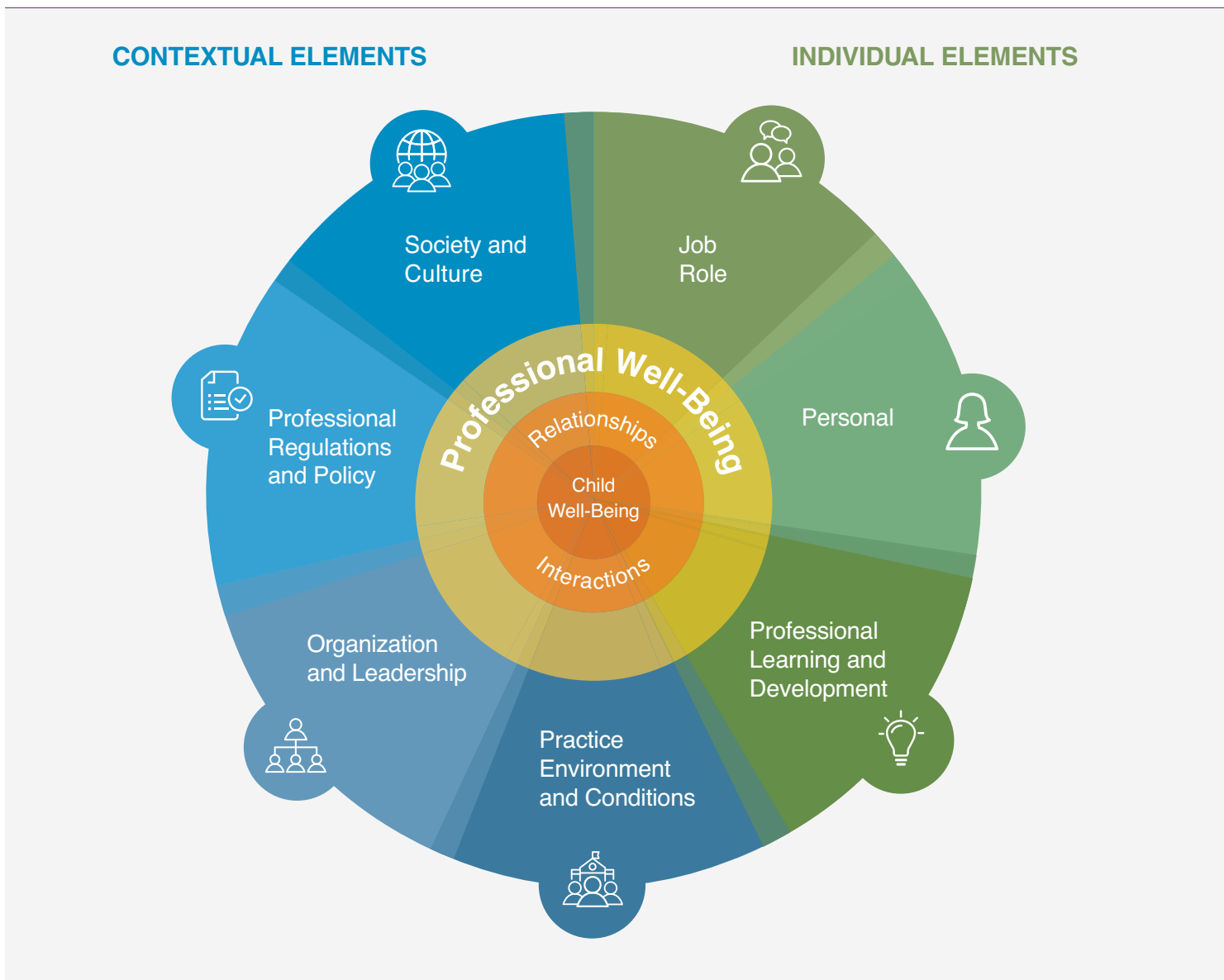
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An Ecological Framework

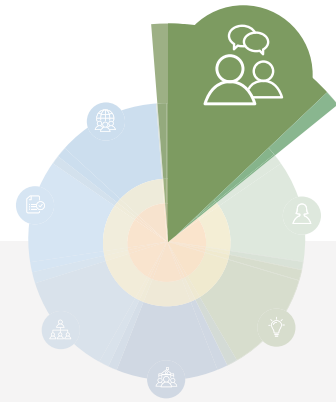


The Early Childhood Professional Well-Being Framework was designed to provide an ecological perspective on the individual and contextual factors associated with early childhood professional well-being. The framework elements and proposed factors can guide research on early childhood settings as well as assist in designing interventions to enhance workforce well-being. Adapted from a clinician well-being model (Brigham et al., 2018), and consistent with bioecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the child's well-being and development are conceptualized as the center of the model, nested in relationship and interaction with the early childhood professional, whose well-being is essential to bring about quality interactions with the child (IOM/NAS, 2015). Creating an ecological frame for the

development of the early childhood professional's well-being are contextual and individual systemic elements. While no element is assumed to be more influential than any other, this framework proposes that contexts may have greater potential influence on a professional's well-being than personal elements. Within each systemic element are listed proposed factors that may contribute to the professional's well-being, many of which have an emergent evidence base.

Significant research has examined aspects of professionals' personal well-being and their associations with health outcomes (Whitaker, et al., 2014), turnover (Wells, 2015), interaction with children (Cassidy, et al., 2011), and child outcomes (Roberts et al., 2016). However, the onus of being well cannot be assigned to professionals alone, and it is apparent that a model is needed that considers a more comprehensive ecological approach. A small and growing body of work has examined how features of contexts, such as working conditions, wages and benefits, and workplace climate relate to well-being (Jeon & Ardeleanu, 2020; Kwon et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2019). While the framework is most applicable to professionals who work in formal, group-based settings (e.g., centers and schools), we anticipate that it can be adapted to fit a range of early care and education settings, including home-based settings.

Job Role



Job Role refers to the characteristics associated with professionals' title and daily **responsibilities** as well as perceptions and status associated with that role. The role an early childhood professional serves in the workplace may be associated with well-being at work. An early childhood professional's role is typically associated with characteristics of **children and families served**, such as children's ages (infant/toddler vs. preschool), family circumstances and care needs, and ability status (e.g., early intervention). Job role may include **career stage** (e.g., seniority and years of service), **education requirements** to serve in that role (e.g. CDA vs. BA), and associated **compensation** (e.g., salaried vs. hourly). Sources of potential stress may impact well-being and include a balance of **job demands**, **autonomy**, and how responsibility is **aligned with authority and decision-making**. The professional's **efficacy** in the role, or power to engage in effective interactions with children and families, is likely affected and impacts the professional's well-being, and may vary with job role. While power differentials and privilege or stigma may be accorded to the job title and role, these are elaborated in the element of Organization and Leadership.

PROPOSED FACTORS

Alignment of responsibility, authority, and decision-making

Associated compensation

Autonomy

Career stage

Children and families served

Demands

Educational requirements

Responsibilities

Self-efficacy

Personal



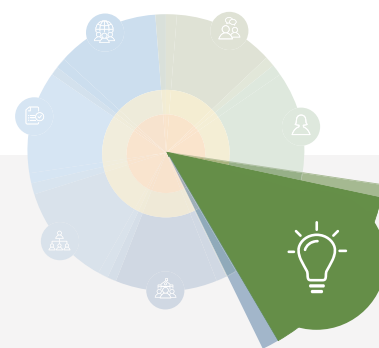
The personal perceptions and characteristics that early childhood professionals bring to their workplace interact with the workplace environment and circumstances to influence ongoing well-being. A professional's **lived experience, personality, mental health, and history of trauma** affect how the professional interacts with children, families, and colleagues, and how they experience the stressors in an early childhood setting. **Self-care practices and physical health** may influence how the professional experiences the physical and emotional demands of working with young children and their families. **Values, ethics, morals, and spiritual practices** may influence how professionals experience the work and stress, how they respond, and how included they feel in the workplace culture. Features of a professional's personal life, such as **family dynamics, relationships, financial status, and hobbies** may provide a buffer for the stresses of a demanding role, or act as additional barriers to well-being. Finally, and importantly, the individual professional's **sense of purpose or mission** in their work may influence their experience of well-being, inside and out of the workplace, and may affect their desire to stay in the profession.

PROPOSED FACTORS

- Family dynamics
- Financial status
- History of trauma
- Lived experience
- Mental health
- Outside interests or hobbies
- Personality
- Physical health
- Relationships and social support
- Self-care practices
- Sense of purpose or mission
- Spirituality
- Values, ethics, morals

Professional Learning & Development

Early childhood professionals come to their role with **knowledge**, skills, and competencies; however, these qualities can also be enhanced over time, and doing so may enhance well-being. Professional learning can manifest as formal education, individual professional development, center-based learning, and coaching or mentoring. A professional may increase **educational attainment**, pursuing an associate's or bachelor's degree, and may increase **teaching competencies and pedagogical skills**. Professional development opportunities and coaching may support enhancing **communication skills and social-emotional competence**, including interpersonal skills, in order to improve relationships with children, families, and colleagues. Professional learning to support **leadership and administrative skills**, provides opportunities for professional growth and potentially leads to career advancement, which may enhance well-being. Formal **career ladders** can also provide a visible path for professional advancement. Finally, professional development can include interventions to support increasing the **executive functioning and resilience** of professionals, skills that are essential for well-being, in and out of the workplace.



PROPOSED FACTORS

Career ladders

Communication skills

Educational attainment

Executive functioning

Knowledge

Leadership and administrative skills

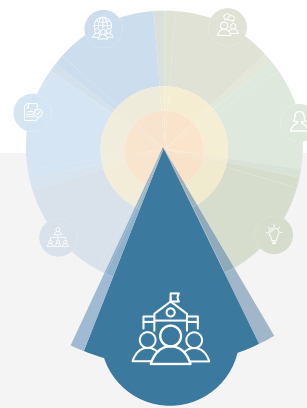
Resilience

Social-emotional competence

Teaching/pedagogical skills

Practice Environment & Conditions

Practice environment and conditions refer to the characteristics of the work setting, most commonly the classroom, school, home (e.g., family child care home), or center. Early childhood professionals' well-being may be impacted by the availability of **supplies and resources** as well as the **physical environment**. For example, furnishings, such as access to adult furniture or the presence of a break room may impact professional self-care opportunities and health outcomes. The **curriculum or educational philosophy** may influence activities, routines, pedagogy, and may offer direction, structure, or guidance to educators. **Class sizes and ratios** include how many children and adults are present in the environment, which may contribute to the extent to which adults feel equipped to meet classroom demands. Furthermore, **workday structure** encompasses working hours (e.g., consistency of one's schedule, the duration of workday), including providing breaks, which has implications for well-being as well as a multitude of related factors (e.g., self-care practices, pay, sense of meaning, etc.). Professionals' well-being may also be determined by relationships they have at work, including **relationships with families and caregivers, professional relationships, and team structures and function** (e.g., how well professionals work together).



PROPOSED FACTORS

Class size and ratios

Curriculum or educational philosophy

Physical environment

Professional relationships

Relationships with parents and caregivers

Supplies and resources

Team structures and function

Workday structure

Organization & Leadership

Organizational culture, or the values, expectations, and norms of the workplace, can affect how professionals perceive acceptance and value within the organization. **Leadership, communication, and power dynamics/organizational hierarchy** may all influence who is involved in making decisions, transparency, how information is relayed, and professionals' sense of **inclusion** or influence. **Compensation and benefits** can directly impact professionals' well-being and how they care for themselves and their families. **Diversity** captures a range of differences among staff and includes race, ethnicity, gender, religion, language, and disability status. In early care and education, it is particularly important to consider staff diversity in relation to the diversity of children and families served. **Equity** includes procedures, processes, commitments, and distribution of resources which promote justice and fairness. In contrast, the experience of **harassment or discrimination** at work can be extremely harmful to one's sense of **safety** and well-being. Lastly, it is important to consider **staff support**, including coaching and mentoring opportunities as a factor contributing to well-being.

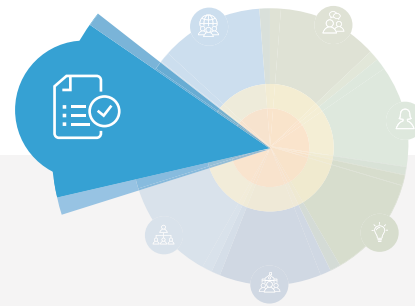


PROPOSED FACTORS

- Compensation and benefits
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion
- Harassment and discrimination
- Internal communication
- Leadership
- Organizational culture
- Power dynamics and organizational hierarchy
- Staff support
- Workplace safety

Professional Regulations & Policy

Early care and education is a heavily regulated and accountable industry, managed by departments of education, health and human services, and licensing. Relatedly, **funding structure and availability** varies by ECE settings, determined in part by state governance and **national and local policies**. Funding and policies can create both stressors and opportunities for professionals, particularly those who manage ECE programs or must abide by the related policy requirements. In fact, professionals are subject to a variety of regulations and policies that govern aspects of their work. Some of these may increase access to well-being, such as **educational and scholarship opportunities** or **union membership**. Others can be experienced as stressful, if not properly supported, such as required **accountability assessments**, maintaining **licensing and professional certification, accreditation, and quality improvement** requirements. State- and national-level governance may provide oversight and set policy that may influence well-being. Finally, professionals' well-being may be affected by **access to other early childhood services**, such as early childhood mental health consultation or early intervention services.



PROPOSED FACTORS

Accountability assessments

Accreditation

Funding structure and availability

Governance

HR policies and compensation

Licensing

National and state education/child care policies

Professional certifications and credentials

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)

Service access

Scholarship and training opportunities

Teacher/child care unions

Society & Culture

Social and cultural factors capture macrosystem-level characteristics that can impact well-being in the workplace and beyond. Early childhood professionals may make decisions that impact their well-being based on the **political and economic context**, such as availability and affordability of health services determined, in part, by health care policies. Furthermore, **bias, discrimination, and oppression** confer disproportionate access to resources and opportunities. This includes **social determinants of health** such as access to access to education, employment, health care systems, housing, income and wealth, public safety, and transportation. For example, discriminatory practices in housing (redlining; racist loan practices) have shaped access to housing, and consequently, career opportunities, schools, and transportation, which shape opportunity for social and economic mobility. When considering the early childhood workforce, these social and cultural factors often determine who has (or had) access to certain opportunities, and who has **power and privilege** at work and in other contexts. Finally, **media portrayal** is also very important. The way information is communicated about individuals with shared identities and affiliations shapes **biases, social norms, and societal expectations**. Particularly relevant to early care and education are expectations around caregiving, including the perceived value of caregivers/educators and the supports they need. These expectations then shape professional reputation, funding, compensation structure, expectations, and identities of early care and education professionals.



PROPOSED FACTORS

Bias, discrimination, and oppression

Media portrayal

Political and economic context

Power and privilege

Social determinants of health

Social stigma

Societal expectations and social norms

Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of articulating this framework is to support design thinking related to prevention and intervention practice, as well as research, program evaluation, and continuous learning. This framework serves as an important call to designing work that is ecological in nature, taking into account the multiple individual and contextual factors that drive the well-being of early childhood professionals, and ultimately, the effectiveness of early childhood education. Much as Bronfenbrenner (1979) called for the study of children from a perspective of development occurring in nested systems of support, this framework is meant to challenge our own work and that of others to consider how teacher and child well-being are nested in the contextual nature of programs, regulatory systems, and society as a whole. The individual professional's well-being and effectiveness are reflected in Person, in Process, and Context over Time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), such that simple interventions are unlikely to convey a sustainable impact. Therefore, research and funding must consider complexity and synergy in its content and processes. Admittedly, while no single study or intervention can encompass all of the proposed factors, the individual and contextual perspectives should always be considered. Engagement in efforts to enhance the well-being of the early childhood workforce warrants asserting that powerful impact of early care and education rests with the effectiveness of early childhood professionals. We contend that investing in the professional's well-being equal to, if not above all other professional investments, is our first task.

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