

The Compassionate Framework: Positioning compassion at the heart of Early Childhood Education and Care

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Abstract

Early childhood is a formative period when the emotional, social, and cognitive foundations for lifelong wellbeing are established. This paper introduces the Compassionate Framework (CF), which comprises the EPIK Reflective Tool (EPIK RT) for assessing professional practice and the EPIK Observation Tool (EPIK OT) for enhancing approaches for children. Collectively, the tools are designed to heighten awareness and practice of compassion as the bedrock of strong pedagogy. Drawing on evidence from developmental psychology, neuroscience, and social and emotional learning, the CF leans on four interconnected components: Emotional Awareness, Perspective Taking, Inclusive Practice, and Kindness (EPIK). Applied collectively, these components enhance children's personal, social, and emotional development while positioning compassion as a deliberately shaped pedagogical orientation that supports practitioners in facilitating equitable early childhood experiences for every child aligned with child development philosophies.

Keywords

compassion, early child development, emotional awareness, EPIK framework, inclusive practice, kindness, relational pedagogy, respect, sense of others, sense of self, social and emotional learning

Introduction: Navigating an Uncertain Future Through Compassion

This paper proposes a Compassionate Framework (CF) for Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) that responds to the social, emotional, and ethical demands facing children growing up in an increasingly uncertain global condition. It has three interrelated aims. First, it positions compassion as a core pedagogical stance that must be intentionally nurtured to support equity-driven, rights-based approaches to Social Emotional Learning (SEL). Second, it introduces the EPIK Compassionate Framework (EPIK CF), organized around four interconnected components: Emotional

Awareness (E), Perspective Taking (P), Inclusive Practice (I), and Kindness (K), which recognize children as agentic participants who both receive and co-create respectful, relational values within evolving educational environments. Third, it outlines two complementary pedagogical tools, the EPIK Reflective Tool and the EPIK Observation Tool, as practice-facing resources designed to support practitioners in cultivating compassion within play-based ECEC through attuned, context-sensitive pedagogical approaches.

Rather than offering a prescribed curriculum or intervention, the EPIK CF is positioned as a pedagogical orientation that supports practitioners to critically examine how

compassion is enacted, modelled, and sustained within everyday interactions. This aligns with scholarship that conceptualizes compassion as an ethical, relational stance rather than a discrete skill or program (Noddings, 2012; Gilbert, 2017). The EPIK Reflective Tool provides structured space for practitioners to interrogate their values, assumptions, and relational practices, echoing calls for critical reflexivity as a foundation for ethical early childhood pedagogy (Brookfield, 2017; Moss et al., 2019). The EPIK Observation Tool supports educators to observe and interpret children's experiences in ways consistent with these ethical commitments, actively foregrounding children's rights, dignity, and agency as articulated in the UNCRC (United Nations, 1989) and contemporary rights-based ECEC scholarship (Lundy, 2007; Clark, 2017). Together, the EPIK CF tools offer a theory-informed and practice-ready pathway for cultivating compassionate dispositions that honor children's rights, uphold relational dignity, and support equitable participation in a rapidly changing world.

The urgency of this work is underscored by the wider conditions in which early childhood education now unfolds. Children's lives are increasingly shaped by widening social inequality, climate instability, conflict and displacement, and rapid technological change (UNESCO & UNICEF, 2024). These forces are not distant or abstract; they manifest in the everyday realities of families, communities, and educational settings, intensifying the emotional and ethical demands placed on practitioners and heightening the need for pedagogies grounded in compassion, justice, and relational responsibility (Liang et al., 2026). The UNESCO report 'Reimagining Our Futures Together' (2025) calls for a new social contract for education grounded in an "ethic of care, reciprocity and solidarity ...

which must repair injustices whilst transforming the future." The EPIK CF responds to this call by recognizing, that cognition is inherently affective and that knowing and feeling are inseparable processes consistent with contemporary neuroscience (Dennis, 2010; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019).

Global reports highlight escalating rates of anxiety, loneliness, and emotional dysregulation among children and young people in some countries (UNICEF, 2025; OECD, 2026), intensifying the need for universal pedagogical approaches that lean off the successes of Social Emotional Learning (SEL). While evidence consistently demonstrates the benefits of social and emotional learning for children's development across social, emotional, behavioral and academic domains (Shi & Cheung, 2024), critics argue that standardized, Western-centric models often overlook cultural and linguistic diversity, thereby marginalizing many children and educators (McKimmy et al., 2023; Lim, Rho, & Yang et al., 2024; Ramirez et al., 2021). Equity-focused SEL requires educators to examine how culture shapes emotional expression and relational expectations, and to interrogate the values embedded within SEL frameworks (Jagers et al., 2019; Yeh et al., 2022). This reframes SEL as relational, contextual practice rather than the acquisition of individual skills. Effective SEL emerges in environments where children experience belonging, agency, and recognition within their cultural and social worlds, rather than through prescribed lessons in regulation or social skills (Ramirez et al., 2021). The question, therefore, is not whether SEL matters, but how it is conceptualized and enacted, which is an issue this paper addresses by proposing a multidimensional framework developed in the following sections.

The CF introduced in this paper adopts a rights-based approach to early childhood education, as articulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) and contemporary rights-based pedagogies. It recognizes children as active agents within their social and cultural worlds and positions compassion as an intentional ethical stance through which educators uphold children's dignity and voice.

The Theorization of Compassion Within the EPIK CF

Compassion is conceptualized within the EPIK CF as attuned relational, ethical, and pedagogically enacted practice through which educators intentionally respond to children's emotional experiences with attentiveness, care, and responsibility. Compassion is further proposed as a stabilizing pedagogical resource for children growing up under conditions of increasing uncertainty. Saarinen et al's (2020) findings underscore compassion as a foundational contributor to long-term wellbeing. Using a large cohort ($N = 1,312-1,699$) followed over a 15-year period, they found that individuals with higher dispositional compassion reported greater positive affect, lower negative affect, and higher overall affective wellbeing. This analysis shows that compassion enhances both how individuals feel (affective wellbeing) and how they think about their lives (cognitive wellbeing), positioning compassion as a powerful developmental resource that supports emotional balance, strengthens social connectedness, and fosters optimistic, health affirming orientations toward the future. Such evidence provides strong empirical grounding for frameworks like EPIK, which conceptualize compassion as a core disposition that can be intentionally nurtured by practitioners in early childhood.

The EPIK CF positions emotional awareness as a core component of early childhood pedagogy, a claim strongly supported by emerging empirical evidence. Johansen et al.'s (2024) study across 27 Swiss playgroups shows that, within adult-supported early childhood contexts, children's ability to identify, interpret, and reason about emotions in themselves and others is positively associated with the quality of their peer relationships in the preschool years. These findings highlight emotional understanding as an important early social-cognitive resource emerging during a formative developmental window. Findings from the 'Growing Up in New Zealand' study (Ahmad et al., 2021) reinforce this developmental significance. Tracking 4,839 children from infancy to 4.5 years, the study showed that persistently low socio-emotional competence including difficulties in recognizing and managing emotions substantially increased the likelihood of below average executive function performance at 4.5 years. This demonstrates that early emotional awareness supports the development of cognitive regulatory capacities essential for children's adaptive participation in everyday life.

Perspective taking within the EPIK CF is theorized as a core developmental process through which early emotional attunement becomes an ethically oriented concern for others. Evidence from a 17-year study of 241 children (Lee et al., 2026) shows that early empathic engagement nurtured through warm, responsive, non-coercive caregiving predicts compassionate concern in emerging adulthood, including toward individuals beyond close relational circles. Lee et al's (2026) structural equation modelling demonstrated that empathy at age six significantly predicted later compassionate concern even after accounting for socioeconomic factors, indicating continuity in

how children come to understand and orient themselves toward others. Crucially, Lee et al (2026) conceptualize this trajectory not as the maturation of a discrete cognitive skill but as the elaboration of children's participation in relationally coordinated experiences, where they learn to interpret others' intentions, beliefs, and emotions through repeated social engagement. Perspective taking therefore emerges as a relational, embodied process shaped by reciprocal regulation and shared meaning-making, rather than a purely representational capacity. This evidence aligns with the EPIK CF's view of perspective taking as a key mechanism through which compassion stabilizes across the life course and as a developmental pathway that can be intentionally supported within early childhood pedagogy.

Inclusive practice within the EPIK CF is grounded in equitable access, meaningful participation and a secure sense of belonging for all children, enacted through strengths based, non-stigmatizing pedagogy embedded within everyday practice. Steed and Barla's (2026) mixed-methods case study illustrates how this is achieved through adaptations to environments, routines, and interactions. In their study, 86% of practitioners reported having appropriate strategies and materials to respond to diverse strengths and needs (mean = 6.29/7), including the use of visual schedules, differentiated tools, flexible seating, and varied groupings. Families described these practices as non-stigmatic, emphasizing that children were supported without being marked as different, closely aligning with EPIK's framing of inclusion as an everyday entitlement rather than a conditional response. Complementing this, longitudinal evidence identifying sense of belonging as predictive of growth in compassion over time (Ward-Seidel et al., 2025), when read alongside early childhood research documenting how

belonging is relationally constructed through inclusive peer interaction, educator modelling, and family engagement in pre-school contexts (Paschal & Mrutu, 2025), strengthens EPIK CF's framing of inclusion.

As a component of the EPIK CF, kindness is understood as a developmentally accessible expression of compassion that can be intentionally nurtured within early childhood education. A Finnish mixed-methods study in an ECEC setting demonstrates that when kindness is embedded within compassionate pedagogical practices, children show increased capacity to recognize others' feelings, articulate compassionate reasoning, and engage in follow-up actions rooted in kindness (Pardon et al., 2023). Although the study involved a relatively small sample of children, guardians and educators, its findings indicate that kindness functions as part of a broader developmental sequence, strengthening prosocial motivation and relational wellbeing that is expressed through compassion. Evidence from Haslip et al. (2019) study further reinforces the EPIK CF's positioning of kindness as a relationally modelled capacity. Working with 16 early childhood educators, the authors found that young children do not develop caring or prosocial behaviors spontaneously; rather, these behaviors emerge in environments where educators consistently model empathy, helpfulness and sensitivity. Because early childhood teachers are often the first non-family adults to form secure, trusting relationships with children, their everyday interactions of listening, guiding and demonstrating kindness play a central role in nurturing children's own expressions of kindness and compassion (Haslip et al., 2019). Within the EPIK CF, kindness is therefore positioned as the everyday, relational enactment of compassion that children can readily participate in and internalize.

The EPIK CF is not only applicable to Western ECEC models. Paik et al. (2022), examining a curriculum-based program with Chinese preschoolers, found that improvements in children's emotion knowledge were associated with enhanced capacity to understand their own and others' inner worlds. The study highlights two important points: first, that emotional understanding and social-cognitive reasoning are tightly linked across cultural contexts; and second, that culturally grounded pedagogical approaches can effectively strengthen these capacities. Their findings reinforce that the components of the EPIK CF are universal even as its expression is shaped by cultural norms, expectations, and pedagogical traditions.

Further global evidence demonstrates that the core components emphasized in the EPIK CF can be intentionally cultivated across diverse cultural, linguistic, and geopolitical contexts. Callaghan et al.'s (2024) large-scale intervention study with 152 Rohingya refugee children living in conditions of displacement and chronic adversity, showed that other orientated behaviors facilitated by focused interventions significantly strengthened children's prosocial behaviors over time. Importantly, these gains emerged within a culturally grounded program co-designed with local educators, underscoring that compassion-focused pedagogies are both adaptable and effective beyond Western settings. Callaghan et al.'s (2024) study also reiterates that prosociality and compassion are fundamental human capacities that can be strengthened even in conditions of extreme adversity, reinforcing the EPIK CF's premise that these capacities can be intentionally nurtured across diverse cultural and contextual environments.

The EPIK CF foregrounds the importance of consistent compassionate

relationships, as repeated exposure to responsive, caring environments which enables children to internalize compassion as a stable developmental resource. Through sustained encounters with care, responsiveness, and relational safety, these experiences are consolidated into secure internal working models that support emotional regulation, adaptive meaning-making, and prosocial engagement (Bretherton & Munholland, 2008). From this perspective, compassion becomes developmentally durable not because it is taught as a discrete skill, but because it is lived, relationally reinforced, and culturally mediated within everyday pedagogical contexts by sensitive adults (Robson, 2020). Increasingly, such internalized relational capacities are associated with children's resilience and wellbeing, engagement with learning, and longer-term life-course outcomes (Robson et al., 2020).

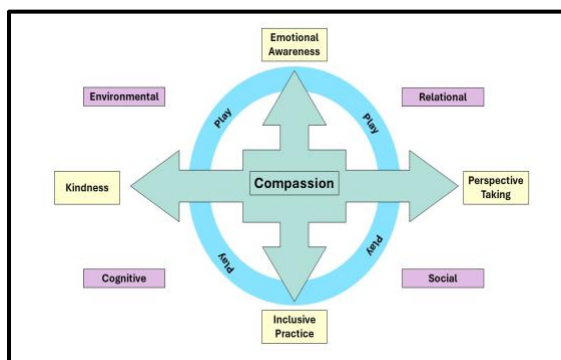
Within the EPIK CF, compassion is understood as an integrative pedagogical orientation that connects children's emotional development with their ethical participation in relational life. Ethics of Care theory conceptualizes compassion as a moral commitment grounded in attentiveness and responsibility toward others (Noddings, 2012), while reflective practice highlights professional judgement as central to attuned pedagogical action (Schön, 1983). For educators, this underscores that compassion requires intentional, ethically attuned judgement rather than spontaneous emotional response. Consequently, educators' emotional engagement forms part of the ethical terrain through which care, justice and participation are actively negotiated in practice (Taggart, 2016; Quinones & Cooper, 2023).

Taken together, this synthesis clarifies how the EPIK components interrelate: emotional awareness and perspective taking underpin children's capacity to act with kindness, while inclusion reflects the relational and ethical conditions through which compassion is enacted. Compassion is therefore positioned within the EPIK CF as a lived pedagogical orientation integrating emotional development, relational practice and ethical responsibility rather than an abstract ideal.

The EPIK CF

The EPIK Compassionate Framework positions compassion as the central pedagogical orientation through which children experience, practice, and internalize relational ways of being. The diagram visually represents compassion as the core from which four interdependent components radiate: Emotional Awareness, Perspective Taking, Inclusive Practice, and Kindness. In addition, the framework is situated within four intersecting dimensions, environmental, relational, cognitive, and social, which shape how compassion is enacted, experienced, and sustained across early childhood contexts.

Figure 1. Epic CF diagram



Play

Play is positioned as the developmental ecology of the EPIK model. Within this ecological space, children exercise agency, negotiate meaning, and participate actively in their own learning as play mediates social interaction and shared understanding. It is where children can authentically communicate their inner worlds, ideas, emotions, identities, and relationships through the language of possibility which Malaguzzi describes as the 100 languages (Polovina & Viunnyk, 2025). The EPIK CF model emphasizes that play provides conditions in which compassion becomes visible, accessible, and developmentally meaningful. Within play, children take emotional risks and dynamically negotiate uncertainty through self-directed, socially mediated engagement, rather than through evaluative or outcome-driven activity (Kleppe et al., 2024). These experiences support compassion to emerge through children's spontaneous responses, collaborative interaction, and shared problem-solving, reflecting evidence that play-based learning enables children to construct meaning, regulate engagement, and learn with and through others (Ndlovu et al., 2023).

The four components

Emotional Awareness reflects children's developing capacity to recognize, express, and regulate emotions within secure relational contexts (Lane & Schwartz, 1987). Emotional awareness emerges through attuned interactions and is strengthened when children experience consistent validation, responsiveness, and social agency (Guard, 2023). Play offers abundant emotional cues, providing rich opportunities for children to notice feelings in themselves and others (Dewi, 2025).

Perspective Taking builds on emotional awareness by supporting children to interpret others' intentions, beliefs, and experiences as part of shared activity. In the EPIK CF, perspective taking is understood as what Ferreira (2023) suggests as an embodied, socially coordinated process, shaped through reciprocal regulation and attuned bodily engagement, with others irrespective of developmental needs. Play provides a generative context for this process, as children coordinate attention, negotiate meaning, and adapt their actions in response to others' goals and interpretations. Through joint attention, role play, and collaborative activity, children encounter opportunities to anticipate others' actions and align perspectives, laying foundations for later theory of mind reasoning (Brandone & Stout, 2023).

Inclusive Practice reflects the ethical dimension of compassionate pedagogy and is grounded in recognition, participation, and belonging. Inclusive practice aligns with rights-based approaches that position children as active contributors to their learning communities, with belonging and agency shaped through shared identity, validation and the relational conditions that enable children to participate meaningfully in the life of the group (Steed and Barla, 2026). Research in inclusive ECEC contexts shows that compassion and kindness can be intentionally embedded within everyday pedagogy, supporting prosocial thinking and action, particularly in diverse groups where exclusion risks are heightened (Pardon et al., 2023). In play, inclusion becomes visible through invitations to join, shared decision-making, and negotiation of group norms, where children practice recognising others' needs and responding with care (Cassidy et al., 2022).

Kindness is conceptualized not as a spontaneous nicety but as an intentional prosocial practice that can be modelled, supported, and sustained. Developmental research conceptualizes kindness as an ethical virtue comprising interrelated emotional, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions that evolve through relational experience rather than emerging automatically (Malti, 2021). Early exposure to kind, responsive caregiving has been shown to strengthen empathic concern and prosocial engagement, laying foundations for future helping, sharing, and comforting behaviors (Pardon et al., 2023). In play, kindness emerges through everyday acts such as offering comfort, sharing resources, and repairing ruptures, which collectively shape children's developing understanding of ethical responsibility and care for others.

While the four EPIK components describe what compassion looks like in early childhood, the four dimensions of the framework describe where and how compassion is enacted. The dimensions provide the relational, social, environmental, and cognitive conditions through which Emotional Awareness, Perspective Taking, Inclusive Practice, and Kindness become visible, meaningful, and developmentally significant. In this sense, the EPIK components are lived through the dimensions, and the dimensions activate the components. Compassion emerges not from isolated behaviours but from the dynamic interplay between children's developing capacities and the ecological contexts that support them.

The dimensions

Surrounding the four components are the relational, social, environmental, and cognitive dimensions, which shape how

compassion is enacted. These dimensions reflect the broader ecological influences on children's development, emphasizing that compassionate practice is not confined to individual interactions but is shaped by group culture, physical space, and opportunities for reflection.

The relational dimension highlights how secure, responsive relationships contribute to compassionate learning within early childhood settings. Drawing on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) and relational pedagogy (Papatheodorou, 2008), this dimension emphasizes that children's expectations of care, trust, and emotional availability are shaped through repeated, contingent experiences of being recognized and responded to with sensitivity (Werchan et al., 2023). Relational practice involves sustained attentiveness to children's emotional cues, histories, and communicative styles, recognizing that compassionate understanding is co-constructed through repeated, reciprocal everyday interactions rather than isolated moments (Komanchuk et al., 2023). Such practice constitutes an ethical commitment in which care and responsibility are enacted through practitioner presence and professional judgement (Taggart, 2016). These relational encounters shape the developmental architecture through which children learn to regulate emotions, build social competence, and engage meaningfully with others, with warm, consistent, and attuned relationships functioning as key drivers of healthy development (Osher et al., 2020).

Importantly, relational practice is not confined to educator–child exchanges but unfolds across a wider ecology of relationships involving peers, families, environments, and children's own developing self-relations (Liang et al., 2026), with play acting as a key medium

through which these relationships are rehearsed, strengthened, and made developmentally significant. Relational experiences also activate the EPIK components: emotional awareness through co-regulation, perspective taking through shared meaning-making, inclusion through recognition, and kindness through modelling.

The social dimension highlights how patterns of interaction, participation, and shared meaning-making shape children's experiences of compassion within early childhood communities. Informed by sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and social learning perspectives (Bandura, 1977), this dimension emphasizes that compassion is encountered and internalized through engagement in social practices rather than through prescribed behaviors. Group norms, peer interactions, language use, and shared routines all communicate implicit expectations about care, fairness, and inclusion. Play strengthens these social processes by providing a flexible, co-constructed context in which children negotiate roles, practice collaboration, and explore the emotional and moral consequences of their actions.

Within play, children observe how peers respond to distress, disagreement, and conflict, and they experience how educators mediate these moments in ways that shape emotional and moral climate (Rosenthal & Gatt, 2010). Through play children learn that compassion is relational, collective, cultural, and socially situated, emerging from the ways groups communicate, problem solve, and hold space for multiple perspectives. At this level, social participation activates the EPIK components by offering opportunities to practice emotional awareness, coordinate perspectives, enact inclusion, and express kindness.

The environmental dimension draws attention to how space, resources, and daily organization shape children's experiences of belonging, emotional safety, and participation. In line with Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (2006), environments are understood as active pedagogical participants rather than neutral settings, mediating the quality and character of children's encounters with others. Research cautions that relational pedagogy risks becoming abstract unless it is grounded in the material realities of practice, including how environments enable or constrain meaningful interaction in everyday moments (Hickey & Riddle, 2023). Decisions about spatial layout, visual representation, resource availability, and organizational routines communicate powerful messages about whose identities are recognized, which emotional expressions are legitimized, and how children are invited to participate. Children's own accounts further highlight how environmental conditions shape their sense of care and inclusion, influencing whether compassionate interaction feels possible, supported, and sustained (Nutbrown & Clough, 2009). From a practitioner perspective, compassion is strengthened when environments are intentionally designed as emotionally safe, participatory, and ethically responsive spaces that support mattering, shared engagement, and equitable access to learning (Owusu-Agyeman & Pillay, 2023). In this way, the environment operates as a dynamic and relational condition that works in concert with the other dimensions of the framework, shaping how compassion is encountered, interpreted, and lived within early childhood settings. Therefore, play acts as a key medium through which environmental affordances become lived, meaningful, and developmentally significant for children.

The cognitive dimension recognizes children's developing capacity to interpret experience, attend to difference, and make ethical sense of social situations as grounded in ongoing neurodevelopmental integration of emotion, relationship, and context. Developmental neuroscience shows that compassion is shaped through the gradual maturation and coordination of executive function, mentalizing, and emotion regulation systems, involving dynamic interaction between prefrontal and limbic networks (Casey et al., 2019; O'Rourke et al., 2020). Because executive control develops more slowly than emotional and reward systems, prosocial reasoning in childhood is effortful and context sensitive rather than automatic. These cognitive systems are highly experience-dependent: emotionally rich, socially attuned interactions strengthen neural pathways which support flexibility, empathy, and moral reasoning, while chronic stress or exclusion disrupts the integration of emotion and cognition (O'Rourke et al., 2020). Play-based experiences are particularly significant in this regard, activating mentalizing and self-regulatory networks that support perspective coordination, anticipation of consequences, and inhibition of impulsive responses (Cromwell et al., 2020).

Neurobiological studies of emotion regulation further indicate that children's capacity to engage adaptively in social situations depends on developing regulatory flexibility within prefrontal–subcortical circuits, scaffolded through supportive relational and environmental conditions (Myruski & Dennis-Tiway, 2021). When such conditions are present, children are better able to link emotional understanding with intentional, context-sensitive action; when they are absent, these integrative cognitive processes are undermined. Cognitive development activates

the EPIK components by enabling children to reflect on emotions, coordinate perspectives, reason about fairness, and enact intentional kindness as their growing understanding of their own and others' emotions allows them to interpret social cues and regulate emotions more flexibly (Malti, 2021).

Bringing CF to Practice

The EPIK CF translates into practice through the everyday moments in which practitioners notice, interpret, and respond to children's emotional and relational lives. Within ECEC the manifestations of the EPIK CF are best witnessed, scaffolded and extended during play is recognized and celebrated as an authentic medium that holds the developmental ecology of children. Rather than prescribing a curriculum, the framework operates as a pedagogical disposition that orients practitioners toward the relational, social, environmental, and cognitive conditions through which compassion becomes possible. The four components are not taught as isolated competencies but cultivated through how practitioners mindfully design space, offer resources, encourage participation, invite reflection, and facilitate exploration. The educator's role is to remain pedagogically present, attuned to the ethical and emotional work children are already doing, and ready to scaffold and extend reflection and exploration when openings arise. This presence is itself a compassionate act, requiring practitioners to resist outcome-driven intervention. Sustaining such practice depends on conditions that support practitioners themselves time to reflect, engage in collegial dialogue, and demonstrate leadership that values relational work as core rather than peripheral, making EPIK both a pedagogy and a call to a new social contract (UNESCO, 2025) for education which helps to reimagine children as active agents in the

present and future changing landscape of the world.

The EPIK Reflection Tool

The EPIK Reflective Tool supports practitioners to examine how compassion is lived, modelled, and co-constructed with children through everyday interactions, routines, and play. Grounded in the four dimensions of the EPIK Compassionate Framework, the tool invites practitioners to reflect on how their relational presence, social practices, environments, and cognitive scaffolding shape children's opportunities to encounter and express compassion. The tool positions play as a central pedagogical space where children rehearse emotions, negotiate perspectives, explore identity, and practice prosocial action. Rather than functioning as a checklist, the tool acts as a reflective companion that encourages deep, ethical inquiry into how children experience belonging, recognition, and mattering within the pedagogical ecology. Through sustained reflection, practitioners can strengthen intentional, compassionate practice that is developmentally attuned, culturally responsive, and grounded in children's lived experiences.

Table 1. EPIK CF reflective tool

EPIK CF Reflective Tool	
<u>Emotional awareness</u>	
Relational	
1.	How attuned am I to children's emotions through facial expressions, tone, body language, and their emotional cues during play?
2.	Do I respond with calmness and empathy when emotions run high, especially in play-based conflicts or moments of frustration?
3.	How do I model healthy emotional expression and regulation in shared play and routines?
4.	In challenging moments, do I seek to understand the feeling before the behavior?
5.	What strategies support coregulating strong emotions during play and transitions?
Social	
1.	How are emotions discussed within the group and within play narratives?
2.	Do routines and play opportunities allow children to recognize and share feelings together?
3.	How do we help children see how their emotions affect others during shared activity?
4.	Are positive emotions noticed as much as frustration or distress?
5.	How do we create a culture where it is safe to express vulnerability?
6.	How do I balance individual needs with group harmony?

7.	How do cultural, familial, or community norms shape how emotions are expressed, interpreted, or valued?
Environmental	
1.	Are there calm, comforting spaces for children to regulate when overwhelmed, including within play areas?
2.	Do visual prompts help children name emotions?
3.	How do lighting, noise, and layout affect the emotional tone of play and interaction?
4.	Are outdoor areas used for emotional release, reflection, and imaginative play?
5.	Does the environment communicate safety and belonging?
6.	What planned or spontaneous play opportunities support emotional literacy?
Cognitive	
1.	How do I model healthy emotional expression and reflective thinking?
2.	Do I acknowledge and validate children's feelings, even when it is inconvenient?
3.	How do I help children name and describe emotions appropriately during play and conflict?
4.	Do I create safe spaces for children to calm down and reflect?
5.	How do I support children to make sense of emotional experiences over time, including reflecting on what happened, how it felt, and what it might mean?

<u>Perspective Taking</u>	
Relational	
1.	How often do I pause to see a situation from the child's perspective, especially during play disputes?
2.	When conflict arises, do I model curiosity rather than judgement?
3.	How do I show I value each child's interpretation of an event or story?
4.	How do I show empathy when communication styles differ?
5.	Do I challenge my assumptions about children's intentions or behavior?
Social	
1.	Do activities and play experiences help children take turns, listen, and understand others' viewpoints?
2.	How are differing perspectives explored through play, storytelling, or discussion?
3.	How do I help children understand the intentions, beliefs, and efforts of others during problem-solving?
4.	Do we model respectful disagreement and negotiation?
5.	How do I ensure quieter children's views are heard?
Environmental	
1.	Do our resources and displays represent diverse experiences and viewpoints?
2.	Are books and materials inclusive of all?
3.	Do outdoor spaces promote collaboration, shared

discovery, and perspective taking?	
4.	How might the environment encourage cooperation rather than competition?
5.	Is there visible evidence that all voices are valued?
6.	How does the environment support children to revisit, reflect on, or narrate shared experiences from different viewpoints?
Cognitive	
1.	Do I encourage children to explain how others might feel in a situation?
2.	Am I attentive to potential challenges to empathy or perspective taking?
3.	Do I create chances for children to resolve conflicts through play and dialogue?
4.	How do I help them recognize that people may think or believe differently?
5.	Do I celebrate when children show perspective taking in action?
<u>Inclusive Practice</u>	
Relational	
1.	Do I adapt communication to each child's needs?
2.	How do I ensure every child feels seen and heard in conversation and group play?
3.	Do I reflect on how bias may shape expectations or interactions?
4.	How do I respond to exclusionary behavior among children?
5.	How do I build trust with families whose experiences differ?

Social

1. Do group activities and play experiences include everyone, or do some children remain on the periphery?
2. How do routines enable all children to participate meaningfully?
3. Are differences in culture, ability, and identity valued as strengths?
4. How do peers support inclusion and invite others into play?
5. Do we model inclusion through collaboration?
6. In what ways are children involved in shaping group norms, routines, or decisions that affect participation?

Environmental

1. Does the layout ensure access for children with mobility or sensory needs?
2. Are resources representative of the children and families we serve?
3. Does the environment visually celebrate diversity and inclusion?
4. Do children see their culture, language, and identity reflected around them?
5. Do outdoor areas include quiet, sensory, and active spaces?

Cognitive

1. How do I ensure all children have the opportunity to participate fully?
2. Do I embrace discussion about difference, identity, and fairness?

3. Do my resources and approaches genuinely reflect diversity?
4. How do I honor individuals' meaning making?
5. Do I invite families to share cultural knowledge and experiences?

Kindness**Relational**

1. How do I show daily kindness through tone, patience, and positive attention?
2. When guiding children, do I do so with warmth and dignity?
3. How do I model forgiveness and repair when mistakes occur?
4. In what ways do I express gratitude to children and colleagues?
5. Do I offer myself kindness on difficult days?

Social

1. How is kindness woven into our routines, rituals, and play?
2. Are kind acts noticed, valued, and shared within our culture?
3. How do I foster peer support and empathy among children?
4. Does kindness extend beyond friendship groups to everyone?
5. Do staff model compassionate communication for children?

Environmental

1. Does the space promote collaboration and shared responsibility?
2. How is kindness visible in the physical environment?

3. Does the environment feel warm, safe, and welcoming?
4. How can outdoor areas nurture kindness through caring for nature?
5. Are there spaces that invite connection and belonging?
6. Is kindness embedded as a philosophy, not just a behavior?

Cognitive

1. Do I teach and celebrate kindness rather than only correct unkindness?
2. How do I create authentic opportunities for children to practice kindness?
3. How do I link kindness with fairness, justice, and respect?
4. Do I affirm small acts of kindness as meaningful?

The EPIK Observation Tool

The EPIK Observation Tool offers a structured way to notice how compassion is expressed, practiced, and supported within early childhood environments. Aligned with the EPIK Compassionate Framework, the tool focuses on observable indicators of Emotional Awareness, Perspective Taking, Inclusive Practice, and Kindness as they unfold in children's play, routines, and social interactions. It highlights the subtle, everyday moments through which children demonstrate empathy, negotiate difference, collaborate, and care for one another, as well as the ways adults' model compassionate communication and create environments where

all children feel included and valued. The tool is not designed to evaluate children but to help practitioners understand the relational, social, environmental, and cognitive dimensions that enable compassionate behavior to emerge. Through developmentally and contextually aware reflections, practitioners are supported to consider the ethical and intentional practice grounded in children's lived experiences.

Table 2. EPIK observation tool

Components of Observation	Observation of practice
Emotional Awareness	
Children are expressing emotions confidently either verbally or non-verbally.	
Children can identify their emotions.	
Children can calm down when frustrated or overwhelmed.	
Children notice when others are upset or excited.	
Children can seek help or comfort from adults or peers when needed.	
Children can develop impulse control whilst waiting or taking turns, etc.	
Children can talk about themselves and others positively.	
Adults are supporting or helping children to express and manage these emotions.	

Components of Observation	Observation of practice
Perspective Taking	
Children can respond to verbal and non-verbal cues.	
Children talk about their feelings either through use of gestures or language.	
Children ask questions about others.	
Children respond appropriately to social situations that require acts of care and affection.	
Children can explain why someone might think or act differently.	
Children acknowledge that others may have different preferences or beliefs.	
Children can adjust their behavior based on another's perspective.	
Adults are supporting children to think about people and situations differently.	

Components of Observation	Observation of practice
Inclusive Practice	
Children relate to space and to each other in thoughtful and considerate ways.	
Children share resources and co-construct play.	
Children are engaging in turn-taking, negotiation, and shared decision-making.	
Children are supported to understand and respect differences by an adult or peers.	

Components of Observation	Observation of practice
Inclusive Practice	
Children show curiosity or acceptance toward unfamiliar customs or perspectives.	
Children include others in play especially those who are quieter or different.	
Adults are modelling democratic values such as fairness, respect, and listening.	

Components of Observation	Observation of practice
Kindness	
Children are offering help or comfort to peers or adults without being prompted.	
Children are demonstrating spontaneous gestures of care, such as sharing, hugging, or offering toys.	
Children are using kind language and tone in interactions.	
Children are engaging in dialogue that reflects mutual respect.	
Children are showing awareness of their own needs while considering others' feelings.	
Children are compromising or sharing during play.	
Adults are modelling mindful behaviors such as using polite language, showing care and concern, asking after the children and adults in the room.	

Concluding Thoughts

The only constant we can rely on is change, and within this shifting landscape lies an opportunity for early childhood practitioners to intentionally shape a new educational contract; one that honors self and other, and supports children to thrive cognitively, environmentally, relationally, and socially. The EPIK Compassionate Framework positions practitioners as active agents within this developmental ecology, capable of setting the emotional and ethical tone of learning environments. By foregrounding compassion as a daily pedagogical commitment, EPIK invites practitioners to cultivate ways of being that nurture dignity, connection, and mutual care. In doing so, the framework magnifies a fundamental ethos: that a caring, loving, and respectful world begins with the everyday interactions between children and the adults who guide them. EPIK offers both the language and the structure for practitioners to exercise and embody compassion, ensuring it becomes a lived reality rather than an aspirational ideal.

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