

## **Ross Thompson: Children's Approaches to Learning**

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Announcer 2: You are listening to "Understanding the ELOF: Stories from Experts," where, each episode, we interview a leading researcher associated with the ELOF domain.

Claire Lerner: Welcome to the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning podcast series, which focuses on the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. In this podcast, we will hear from Ross Thompson about approaches to learning. We hope you enjoy this broadcast.

Announcer 2: From the ELOF, approaches to learning — "Focus on how children learn. It refers to the skills and behaviors that children use to engage in learning."

Claire: Hi, Ross. Thank you so much for coming in today to talk with us about the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, fondly known as the ELOF, which describes the skills, behaviors, and knowledge that programs should be fostering in all children.

We really appreciate it, and we're really excited to have others benefit from your wisdom on the very important subject that we're going to be talking about, which is what we call approaches to learning. Why don't you tell us a little bit about you and your background.

Ross Thompson: Well, Claire, I'm a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis. I have a lab where I study young children, called the Social and Emotional Development Lab, and that gives you a pretty good idea of what we study in children — social-emotional development, parent-child relationships, how children understand emotions. We study elements that are related to children's approaches to learning, particularly the development of the self-regulatory skills that help children develop social competence but also help children develop the skills for classroom learning.

Claire: So, because that's kind of an abstract concept, I thought it might be helpful for you to start by telling us about how you see this concept of approaches to learning and why it's so important.

Ross: The concept of approaches to learning can be hard to wrap your mind around, but the important thing is to recognize that "approaches to learning" really describes learning skills. If the knowledge is the data that we want children to have about the world, the learning skills, or approaches to learning, are the software by which they acquire that data. Much of the time, we're concerned about how children develop language, how children develop math skills, how they acquire concepts about number and about the world. The learning skills are the ways in which they acquire those concepts. They include things like the child's curiosity, the child's initiative as a learner, the desire to discover. It includes their creativity in thinking about their experiences. It includes their persistence and their ability to keep on when they may face an obstacle in a learning challenge. And a lot of these learning skills, a lot of these approaches to learning are united by the child's growing self-regulation ability. And it's as children become

more self-regulating as learners — cognitively self-regulating, self-regulating their attention, self-regulating their emotions and their impulses — their approaches to learning improve, their learning skills improve, and they become better learners.

Claire: Okay, great. So, let's start with one of the goals that's identified in the ELOF, that children develop the ability to show persistence in actions and behaviors. Tell us what that might look like in a real-life classroom and how teachers are promoting this and self-regulation at the same time.

Ross: Children's ability to persist, especially when they're facing obstacles or difficulties in a problem-solving situation or when their initial efforts fail, that ability to persist grows over time. It grows over time in part because the areas of the brain that help them to persist, to regulate themselves in this way, are maturing. So, as teachers, we help to support their persistence in developmentally appropriate ways. With younger children, some of it comes from working alongside with them and showing that we're enthusiastic about what they're trying to do. When they have difficulties, we convey our confidence that they'll be able to figure this out eventually.

Sometimes, especially with older kids, it helps to put this into words. You know, say, "Boy, it's really frustrating that our effort to get this done didn't work. Let's try something else. What can you think of?" To put it into words in this way helps the child be able to recognize what they're feeling but not have it be an obstacle to their trying further on. It's that sense that children have that, "My efforts may not be succeeding now, but they can succeed," that a teacher, in working alongside the child, but not providing the answer, can help to encourage the child's persistence.

Claire: How is being persistent an important component of self-regulation?

Ross: A child of almost any age within this birth-to-5 range is going to initially be interested in giving up if their first opportunities to solve the problem aren't successful. It's when somebody in that learning environment supports the child's own self-confidence in being able to come up with a solution, or maybe even, in some circumstances, said, "You know, let's try something else, and then we'll come back to this later," that enables the child to develop the cognitive structures that help the child develop the self-regulatory skills that enable them to persist on their own.

Claire: So, let's try one more in our brief time together, which is about curiosity. And the goal here says, "Children show interest in, and curiosity about, objects, materials, or events." So, again, what might this look like, from the adult's perspective, in the classroom when they're wanting to encourage curiosity?

Ross: Well, the ELOF, in fact, refers to children's curiosity a lot in talking about approaches to learning. And it's drawing on something that we all know about children, which is that they are naturally curious and inquisitive. And yet, oftentimes, children may be frustrated that they can't figure out something or actually not be naturally drawn to explore something that is new and different. In this case, again, teachers who are working alongside the child as a partner can help facilitate the child's discovery, not by telling the child what this new thing is all about but by saying, "Let's find out," and exploring it together, commenting on its characteristics or what it

can do. We might ask the child, "Well, what do you think?" Sometimes it's helpful if you ask a child, "Well, what would happen if we did something or other to it?" In this way, we aren't providing the answer to the child. We are stimulating the child to move toward their own answers and stimulating them to ask the kinds of questions that we want, eventually, them to be asking themselves, by modeling our own curiosity and using it to build the child's curiosity.

Claire: Yeah, I love this idea of, rather than answering their questions, using that as an opportunity to ask them for their thoughts and ideas or how, together, they might discover. Well, Ross, thank you so much for coming in today. We really appreciate it.

You've shared a lot of really important concepts in a very concrete way that I think will help a lot of people who are listening out there take action to do a really great job of supporting children in thriving and taking full advantage of the awesome opportunities they have in the programs that they're lucky enough to be in. So, thank you so much for coming.

We hope you've enjoyed this podcast, featuring Ross Thompson, on how the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework applies to the approaches to learning we take in helping young children develop the skills they need to be successful in school and in life.

Have a great day.

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