

Parallel Play: Initiative, Creativity, Curiosity

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Mike Browne: Fostering initiative, curiosity, and creativity requires us to look at each child's creativity, and them alone.

Becky Sughrim: When children are engaged in creating or experiments, adults can take a deep breath and step back, stay alert, and observe the children. [Music] Hello, and welcome to Parallel Play, a podcast for educators who love toddlers, where we focus specifically on toddlers, and how best to support their development. My name is Becky Sughrim, and my pronouns are she/her. I'm a White female, infant toddler educator, mom, and professional development enthusiast.

Mike: Hello, and welcome back for Episode Two. I am Mike Browne. My pronouns are he/him. And I'm your Afro-Caribbean male toddler educator of color. Becky and I are from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, or NCECDTL.

Becky: I am really excited to talk with you, Mike, today about initiative, curiosity, and creativity with toddlers. When I worked in a group care setting, my absolute favorite part about working with others as seeing that sense of wonder in their eyes as they learn about the world, watching that like a spark of curiosity light up their faces, and then observing it in action as they explore.

Mike: I remember my first experience working with the toddlers? My mom had an in-home childcare center. Shout-out to mom, hi Mom! This means that I was always playing teacher assistant. One of the children we had in our program was named Zachary, and Zachary was the only other male child in the program at the time, and he really took to me. I know today we're going to be talking about fostering a toddler's creativity. But I really want to just point out the fact that toddlers can do so much for us as adults, but only if we allow ourselves to be vulnerable, if we approach our work with this growth mindset.

As I reflect back on my years with him, I really do credit him with fostering my curiosity in brain science, in child development, and really just relationships. Now I carry that into my work in a group care setting, as part of the leadership team, and now my work uplifting and centering Black indigenous people of color in early childhood education.

Becky: I agree with you. Being inspired by toddlers is really powerful. It's very motivating, and it definitely has a lasting impact. Creative and curious adults support creative and curious toddlers. I think most people believe that you're either creative or you're not. The truth is that everyone is creative. It's a practice skill. It's really about giving yourself the opportunities to be creative.

Mike: Did you know that we are born curious? But that only makes up about 20% of our curiosity. Let that sink in. Right? I think the rest of that is either fostered or squashed by the environments that we live in. Now I am curious to listen in to some toddlers engaging in curiosity, creativity, and how they're showing initiative.

[Audio clip begins]

[Music]

Child: What are you looking at?

Teacher: That's a frog.

Child: Frog.

Teacher: I don't think I can, either.

Child: Hello? Hello?

Teacher: Okay. Who's on the phone? Hello?

Child: Hello? Hello?

Child: How about if we put this in, and we put it in there. And then we put that, and we put in that.

Teacher: That's it. You got it.

[Music]

[Audio clip ends]

Mike: Curiosity is the strong desire to know or learn something. I'm sure we can all picture a toddler who has a strong desire to want to know more about something. Personally, I was just at a Juneteenth celebration a few weeks back, and I saw a toddler like itching to see the colors, the sights. And Black joy happened.

Becky: I'm lucky enough to see it in my own apartment. I have a two-year-old, and that sense of wonder and that curiosity, just you see – I see it all the time. The other morning, I was cooking breakfast. I was cooking breakfast on the stove, and he pulled up the chair next to me so that he could stand up and see what I was doing. He was so curious to know more of what was in the pan.

Mike: What I love about that is that you didn't squash the opportunity. It goes back to what we were just talking about, about fostering it or squashing it in our environments. You could have said, "Hey, get off that chair!" "That's not safe!" All these other different things. But you saw that he took initiative, that he acted on his curiosity. The educator in you was like, "Hey, I'm going to follow his lead. I'm going to encourage it." That's what we want all of our educators to be doing in our environment.

Becky: I think this, this moment with him it really helps me see how initiative and curiosity go hand-in-hand. He was curious so then he took initiative to push the chair to the stove. The way I think about it is that curiosity about the world motivates the child to explore and discover, and initiative allows that exploration to happen. [Music]

Mike: Let's take a look at our Head Start Early Learning Outcome Frameworks, or ELOF for short, and specifically the approaches to learning goal. I'm interested in really diving deep into, and I quote, "Child demonstrates emerging initiatives in interactions, experiences, and explorations." This development progression says that between 8 and 18 months, children

really show initiative by pointing to desired people, their objects or places. That they'll also initiate actions such as looking for their favorite toy, bringing a book to an adult to read, or actively resist actions or items that they don't want.

Becky: One of my favorite parts about this goal is that – or the progression, excuse me, is that it includes the child taking initiative by resisting. A toddler turning their face away from the last bite of food, saying no to a book that they don't want to read.

Mike: It's knowing what they want and pursuing that. That's initiative. That "no" that toddler loves saying, and oh my goodness, they do love saying "no", let's not shut that down. Let's not shame it, or assume that this toddler is being defiant. In fact, let's model that for them, that "no" is OK. So that when we say "no", they understand it's not the end of the world. Of course, this will take time and practicing, accepting "no" from both the adults and the toddlers because it's a two-way street. For those of us working with slightly older toddlers, the development's progressions is between 16 and 36 months, children will prepare for or start some activities without being directed by others, like getting ready for the next activity, or bringing a ball to a child at the playground, etc.

Becky: This part of the progression reminds me of when I worked in group care setting, and I would say, "OK. It's time to clean up and get ready to go outside." Most of the children would just head right over to the door to get their coats on, that they were actually taking initiative by getting ready for the next activity.

Mike: I think this is a great opportunity to really just pause and remind ourselves that the developmental progressions are guidelines. Children develop at different rates and in their own unique way. What's most important here is that we meet toddlers where they are developmentally instead of where we think they should be based off their age, their race or gender, their ability, or their class.

Becky: That's such an important reminder. Thank you, Mike. It can take a lot to reframe and be really intentional about that, so it's always helpful to have a reminder. I am curious to know what are some ways we can support initiative in the learning environment?

Mike: I think one way we can support initiative is to have items on low shelves or at children's levels so they can access them on their own. We can even bring in principles of universal design in order to make sure that it's successful to those with different physical abilities. If the materials aren't out, try putting them in clear eco-friendly bins so children can see them and ask for them. It's beneficial have also visual supports like pictures of the activities to really support the toddlers in using multiple means of communicating so they can take initiative to communicate that to you. [Music]

Becky: I want to talk, talk more about curiosity.

Mike: Because research shows us that curiosity is just as important as intelligence and persistence in student achievement. It leads to better relationships. People with more curiosity have greater life satisfaction. They live longer, and the level of curiosity can predict leadership ability.

Becky: I think, if we're hoping that toddlers will have these attributes later in life, we need to foster their curiosity now so we can help them build this foundation of curiosity.

Mike: As I said earlier, we can squash their curiosity. Shaming or correcting toddlers when we get the wrong answer is one way we do this because we're too focused on the outcome as opposed to the process. In those moments when we want to correct the toddler, I challenge you to try to say something a little different. Maybe try saying something like, "Oh really? Well, can you tell me more about that?" Because not only will we support the toddler, in exploring their ideas, you can also gather information on what they know and how they're applying it to the world around them, which is a great segue for us to look at the development of progressions again. Don't forget, you can access all of this information on the ELOF2GO app. E-L-O-F@Home app.

Looking at one of the approaches to learning goals, the child shows interest in and curiosity about objects, materials, and events. The progression states between 8 and 18 months. Children approaches to new events or experiences with others, or materials with interest and curiosity such as intently listening to a new song or examining a new toy, or material.

Becky: Talking about new toys and materials, research also says that children play longer when there are fewer toys, and that the novelty, or freshness, or newness of a new toy can boost creativity.

Mike: I just absolutely love the days when we're in the classroom or we're in the learning environments, and we're just like, it's time to get rid of some things. It's time do some spring cleaning. We take things out. We invent new things. Because when I see myself, removing certain materials and giving the toddlers the bare minimum, and tell them, "You know what? Just go have fun," they use their imaginations.

They take that pipe cleaner for example, and that pinecone that I give them. And they turn it into a rocket ship, or they crumble the pinecones up and make – they make traditional medicine. They go around and they pretend to sage the room with it. It's really interesting seeing all the different ways in which their imagination comes to life.

[Audio clip begins]

[Music]

Teacher: I saw something good.

Child: No playing.

Teacher: No playing?

Child: Dinnertime!

Teacher: It's dinnertime. And then what happened?

Child: The bubble and the princess cried all along to my house.

Teacher: Oh.

[Music]

[Audio clip ends]

Mike: Let's bring it back to what the development progression says again. Between 16 and 36 months, children might participate in new experiences, ask questions, experiment with new things and materials, such as collecting leaves and pinecones in the fall.

Becky: When we think about this developmental progression and bringing in new materials, we want to really be intentional about bringing in new materials. Offering several new experiences at one time can feel really unsettling to some children. It's important to note asked how all of the children respond to changes in the environment and find that balance where all children can thrive and feel comfortable and be curious.

Mike: Some tips that can help with changes in the material are to make sure that items are relevant and that they're interesting to the children. Notice your timing of when you're bringing it into the environment, not bringing in too many new things all at once because curiosity fosters curiosity. One more time for the people in the back. Curiosity fosters curiosity. A question and I'm always asking myself in the learning environment, or even as I'm talking to you right now is how am I not just using my words, but how am I also using my nonverbal actions in the environment itself to encourage curiosity and this ongoing engagement?

Becky: That is such a great question, Mike. Here are a few tips for supporting curiosity. It's important to have open-ended materials in a learning environment because they support creativity, curiosity, and initiative since the materials lend themselves to be whatever the child wants them to be. When selecting open-ended materials, follow the children's lead, and think about what they are interested in. You know, what experiments they have been doing and what skills they are working on.

Mike: Just make sure that the materials aren't choking hazards. Depending on your state guidelines and your organizational-specific COVID guidelines that the materials able to be cleaned before sending them out in the learning environment.

Becky: I am all for loose parts, or open-ended materials, or everyday materials, whatever you choose to call them. Items like paper towel tubes, scraps of felt or fabric, paper shreds, curlers, silicone muffin cups, and small metal ramekins are some of my favorite.

Mike: Let's take a quick break.

[Music]

Woman: If you've enjoyed this episode of Parallel Play, make sure you check out Teacher Time, a series a webinars that provides teachers and family childcare providers with content knowledge and teaching practices related to child development. Find separate Teacher Time webinars for infants and toddlers and preschoolers on Approaches to Learning, Inclusion and Belonging, Exploring Scene, and many more topics on the ECLKC website under Teacher Time series.

[Music]

Becky: Open-ended question. These types of questions encourage toddlers to think deeper and respond with more than a one-word answer. Of course, the toddler might respond non-verbally

or with one word, and some open-ended questions you might ask are, "I wonder what will happen if," or, "Why do you think", or, "Can you tell me more about?"

Mike: Asking those types of questions encourages problem-solving, thinking deeper. For some people, it feels strange asking toddlers big questions like these, but it's important that we do so. Toddlers and young children are capable and more than competent.

Becky: It's important to remember to pause and wait for the toddler to respond after asking a question. Take that deep breath; give them a chance to process the information, and then to respond to you. Make sure you are watching for those nonverbal responses. It can be really challenging to wait, especially after you ask a question. Take a deep breath, try counting to five slowly in your head, and take this moment to be a detective. Look for signs and nonverbal cues that the child is thinking or preparing to respond. You can also use this pause as a time to check your own body language. Are you showing the child that you are still interested in what they have to say.

Mike: I like that. Take a deep breath and count to five. Another strategy is to model curiosity. Talk about what you're doing or self-talk. Talk about your thinking. That might sound something like, "Hmm, didn't work out the way I had hoped. I wonder what would happen if we try this instead?" [Music] Creativity is about creating. It includes skills like innovation, flexible thinking, problem solving, social skills, imagination.

Becky: I think toddlers are sometimes better at these skills than adults, toddlers are limited by assuming how the world works or limited by social norms. This really allows them to think bigger and in ways that adults don't, or can't, or really struggle with.

Mike: Creativity is also how we celebrate each child's unique way of creativity of being, doing, and thinking in the world. It's how we express who we are to those around us.

Becky: Maybe creativity shows up in the way your family cooks, or the way they dance, or create music, or it's the way they tell stories. A great way to see if these beautiful differences in creativity is to invite families to share their creative gifts, culture, values, displays, and traditions.

Mike: We can also use that information to extend children's learning. If the children in your environment, they all know about drums, you can use that information and bring in the bongos. You can slowly introduce them to the Afrobeats, to salsa, to soca music. Before you know it, they going to asking you for those type of musics rather than listening to Frozen for the 13th time in a row. If they want to listen to "Frozen" for an hour straight, then absolutely play it. Follow their lead. When it's done, you can then play "Encanto" and ask them, "Hey, what sounds different between the two?" Now that you have a connection, now that you're building the momentum, you can come back later during lunchtime or maybe a different day, maybe during free play time, and play, hey, play some merengue. Talk about the tambura or the bandolas. Just as we mentioned earlier, Becky, it's our job to be just as creative as the children so we can challenge their worldviews. We can pique their curiosity.

Becky: It's such a great way to honor family culture and support a sense of belonging and extended a child's learning.

Mike: Observing the children knowing that, oh, they might be interested in this. Ooh, what might be relevant to them, their culture, the skills they are currently exploring. Creativity is also a form of expression. For example, toddlers might engage in pretend play, or expression to work through a feeling, or process an event.

Becky: Toddlers are learning to verbalize their language. They're also learning coregulation skills and they're also learning about emotions. Creativity is such a valuable form of expression.
[Music]

Mike: Let's look at another ELOF goal. The child uses creativity to increase understanding and learning, and in its developmental progression between 8 and 18 months, children might find new things to do with familiar everyday objects.

Becky: I love this part of the developmental progression because it's amazing to see all of the new things that toddlers do like using a wooden block as a phone, or pinecones as carrots in the soup they're making. One thing that's really important to remember that even if we've seen a child use a block as a phone many, many, many times in our years of experience, if it's new for that child, then it's innovative and creative.

In this last part of the developmental progression from 16-36 months, children might combine objects or materials in new and unexpected ways, and show delight in creating something new. We might see toddlers do this while engaging in pretend play. That, throughout the toddler years pretend play starts to develop from independent play, parallel play, and more complex play with other children.

This is another reason why it's so important to have open-ended and everyday materials for toddlers because it lets them practice pretend play. The stacking cups that have been out in the environment all year suddenly turned into cups for drinking hot tea or used to give the baby dolls a bath. I want to know what can we do to support these skills in toddlers?

Mike: I want to challenge our listeners to think about what they do to foster their own creativity because I think there might be some connection with the ways that we can support toddlers.

Becky: One of the things that I do that supports my creativity is having uninterrupted time to create.

Mike: Toddlers can be the same way. Having uninterrupted time allows the toddler to initiate their ideas, to work through until the toddler feels like it's finished, or they're content with the amount of exploration they have done, which takes some self-awareness and control on our part as the educators. I say that because oftentimes I feel like we want to step in, and interrupt, and correct. We're so focused on the idea of finding these quote/unquote "teachable moments", when we think we see one, we got to jump in. We want to get involved. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. I just want to be more mindful of when we are interrupting children's play or children's thoughts. Because if we're constantly disrupting their authentic exploration and their creativity, what might happen? They might have been onto something so brilliant, or they're engaging in conversation and play that makes you feel uncomfortable. But they're about to reveal why and how they're thinking that way. But in our adult's brain, we hear

something that we didn't like and we interrupt rather than being curious and allowing the true teachable moment to unfold.

Becky: How do we do this? How do we stop ourselves or take a moment and be self-aware? It's really about being flexible with our thinking, our perspectives, and our schedules.

Mike: When thinking about setting up the environment, make sure children have enough space to experiment and to create. If you're physically able, try getting on the toddler's level and looking around the room. If you're not able to, then let's get creative. If there's a camera in the learning environment, give it to the child. Tell them, "Go ahead. Take photos. Record which you see."

Or ask the children to draw their learning environment and see what they focus on. Take a tour of your learning environment and ask the children, "Hey, what do you notice first?" Measure children's arms. Measure and see what's within their grasp. Because with that in mind, then you can start to ask yourself questions like: "Do the children have enough space to move around and create? Do toddlers who use adaptive mobility devices have access to these spaces without obstacles?"

Becky: Once you've set up the space, you want to leave it for a bit and observe the child in it. Look for what's working and what's challenging, and make changes as necessary. Follow the child's lead on the environment set-up as well. It's also important to think about the types of experiences or activities you are providing for the toddlers. Are they open-ended experiences like process work or project work?

Mike: I haven't heard those two words in a long time. When we talk about process work, we're really talking about when there is no set product that you're hoping will be created or duplicated at the end. When we think about project work, that's when we have an outcome in mind that you want to be completed. Process work supports initiative, curiosity, and creativity because it allows the child to explore and use the materials in any way that they can imagine. If the project doesn't come to fruition, that's OK. If that lovely activity or material that you put out in the art corner that you hope would turn out to be, I don't know, a self-portrait, and it turned into them painting their bodies, that's the magic of working with young children.

Becky: It's all about the process the children choose to engage in. Let's take a listen to some toddlers engaging in process work.

[Audio clip begins]

[Music]

Teacher: Painting with yellow. You have so many different colors on your paper. You have blue.

Child: Got blue.

Teacher: And red.

Child: Green.

Teacher: Look, you mixed it together. You've got some purple and some brown.

Child: I've got purple. I got the purple and green.

Teacher: And you think that you've got some green in there too? A little bit of green right there in the middle.

[Music]

[Audio clip ends] Mike: I notice more talking from the adult than the toddler in that last audio clip. There's so much narration of what the child was doing or what we call parallel talk. It reminds me that even while toddlers verbal communication is expanding, they communicate a lot non-verbally.

Becky: Adult interactions have a big impact on toddler's creativity, curiosity, and initiative. Parallel talk is a way to provide information or that teachable moment with a toddler while also letting the toddler explore and create freely because parallel talk is child-led.

Mike: Which is a big part of curiosity, of creativity, of initiative. Parallel talk sends that message of, "Hey, I see you." It sends that to a child and provides reassurance, especially when they're trying to, trying something new or something different.

Becky: I think it's also really important to use the words "initiative", "creative", and "curious" to describe toddlers. That's really powerful. Naming for the toddlers. "You're so creative. You put the curler into the paper towel tube." or, "You're so curious about the spider web. You're looking at it so closely." When you bring out new materials or toddlers are focused on their play, or an object, or you set out open-ended materials, these might be times where you take a moment to observe and ask yourself what skill the toddler is showing in this moment. Is it initiative? Is it creativity? Is it curiosity? Is it all three? Then try naming it. And this builds language, and helps the toddler, and adults see the toddler as curious, creativity, and capable of initiative.

Mike: Okay. I have to take a deep breath and count to five. Because I wanted to let that sink in. This also makes you really think about our expectations for toddlers. We see what we expect from toddlers. If you're expecting that toddler to be creative, curious, and can take initiative, you are going to see that. We challenge our listeners to really take a deeper look at your expectations of toddlers.

Becky: This is such a challenging process and so worth it for everyone.

[Audio clip begins]

[Music]

Child: What happened?

Teacher: You tell me what happened.

Child: He just missed her friends.

Teacher: He had missed his friends. That's why you think they went away?

Child: This is yellow. It's dripping. Why is it dripping?

Teacher: It is dripping.

Child: I'm painting my hand.

Teacher: You're painting your hand too?

Child: I'm making blue on my hand.

Teacher: You're making blue on your hand?

Child: I'm making pink for me.

Teacher: You're making pink on your hand? All right.

[Music]

[Audio clip ends]

Becky: We have talked about so much today. Before we go, let's do a little wrap-up.

Mike: Absolutely. We talked about the importance of building a foundation of curiosity and creativity in children, which includes skills like the ability to express emotions, problem solve, create innovative ideas, and wonder about the world. We also talked about how initiative helps toddlers put their ideas and wonderings into action. Then we spent some time talking about the ways that we can support initiative, curiosity, and creativity through setting up the environment choosing open-ended materials, open-ended questions, encouraging process work, and in our interaction.

Becky: We also checked in about our expectations of toddlers, and if we need to do some reframing so that we can see and believe that toddlers are creative, curious, and able to take initiative.

I also want to let our listeners know that there are a ton of great resources on the ECLKC website about supporting messy play with infants and toddlers, following the child's lead, make-believe play, and many other topics. You can also find other podcasts like this one on several different topics on the Head Start Talks app. I highly suggest to check out the Research On-the-Go podcast about creative learning environments for infants and toddlers. We hope that you will check out these resources and that you find them helpful.

Mike: We also encourage you to think about one thing you're going to do the support initiative, creativity, and curiosity in the toddlers you care for, as well as in yourselves. Let us know what you're going to implement on MyPeers in the Teacher Time community. If you aren't already a member of MyPeers, what are you waiting for? We invite you and we encourage you to join in.

Becky: Thank you so much for joining us today, and thanks for talking with me, Mike, and we'll talk again soon.

Mike: I cannot wait. Until then, be well.

[Music]