

Fostering Playful Learning Experiences for All Infants and Toddlers

Announcer: Hello, and welcome to Research on the Go, a podcast where we explore some of the latest research in the field of child development and implications and the practical applications of this research.

Beth Zack: Today, we're talking about fostering inclusive play for all infants and toddlers. My name is Beth Zack and I'm here with my colleague Marie Baeta.

Marie Baeta: Hi, everyone. We're from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, NCECDTL. We're based at I-LABS, Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington. I-LABS and NCECDTL partner organization is an interdisciplinary research center dedicated to understanding human learning with a focus on early learning and the brain.

Beth: Now that you know a little bit about us, let's talk about play.

Marie: One of my favorite things to do.

Beth: Me too. Play is an important part of childhood that helps children learn and grow. It supports their brain development and the development of skills across the early learning outcomes framework or the ELOF learning domains.

Marie: Research shows that play provides many of the same benefits to adults as it does to children, from boosting creativity to building relationships to supporting physical and mental health. And not only that, it's also fun for us.

Beth: Before we jump into our content, I just want to take a moment to go over our learning objectives for today. The first is to describe infant and toddler play through a lens of equity, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness. The second is to identify strategies to create playful learning experiences that are accessible and meaningful to all infants and toddlers. This includes setting up those play experiences that can support children's IFSP goals. To get us started today, we'd love for you to think about the role of play in your own lives. What is your favorite way to play as an adult?

Marie: Something that's helpful, if you're having trouble trying to think of what it's like to play, something that's helpful is tapping into the feelings of play. Play is something you choose freely, that gives you positive feelings and is flexible, also known as flow state, that feeling I relate to when the world just kind of melts away. And for me, playing sports and doing art is mostly how I play.

Beth: Flow state, I love that. When I was thinking about this question, I realized I enjoy a lot of different kinds of play from moving my body through group exercise and hiking to playing card games with my daughter or drawing. One of the things that's really cool about play is that even

though it can look different for adults, it also shares similar characteristics of play for children. Like me, my daughter also enjoys moving her body, but she often does this by jumping all over the place or just dancing around. Some of these ways are solitary, things you like to do on your own, some are more social, might provide a connection for you, or focus on creativity or that physical movement. We really appreciate you thinking about the different ways that we as adults like to play.

Marie: Play is universal. It even appears in non-human mammals and birds. And although play is universal, how we play and what play looks like varies across individuals, families, cultures, and communities.

Beth: Absolutely. Play doesn't always have to look like building with blocks or board games, it can take on many forms and it can happen anywhere, from a little baby just kicking up their toys with their feet to playing peekaboo to even routines like bath time or a child helping feed chickens on their family farm. As we just mentioned, it can also happen alone or with others, and it can be adult- or child-driven.

Marie: It's important to keep this in mind as we observe and learn more about children's play that these differences create beautiful varieties of play.

Beth: In order to practice equity, we need to show up with a curious mind to help us understand and value all the different kinds of play.

Marie: We'd like to highlight some specific ways that play can vary for children. I think this next quote really summarizes the spectrum of how play is viewed. "Play has greatly varied significance for child development across cultures. In some, it's considered a pivotal building block, and in others, it's viewed merely as an incidental activity."

Beth: Yes, we have different cultural views of play, including what is actually defined as play, what it looks like, and the role and importance of it in children's daily lives. For example, our own comfort level with how messy children get with play, that can also be cultural, but then it also can be based on our own preferences.

Marie: So can our level of expression and restraint during play. Do you mask feelings or do you tend to be more expressive? Like maybe a child who seems aggressive or loud to you might be simply more expressive and engaging in play in a way that they're more familiar with within their family or culture.

Beth: That's a great example. I also want to bring up imitation here because it's a type of play that we see across cultures although what children are imitating and the roles that they're playing, that's really based on what they're observing and they're experiencing in their family and their culture. For example, some babies and toddlers may put that phone to their ear whereas others are pretending to build a fire or hold and feed a little baby.

Marie: When we're thinking about older toddlers, do the children pretend to be construction workers or farmers taking care of animals, or maybe driving buses in a big city? Or maybe they pretend to have two moms and two dads because that's their experience at home.

Beth: Yes. In some families, parents and grandparents and adult caregivers, who regularly play with their children, but in other families and cultures that may be more unfamiliar or uncomfortable. A child in this type of culture might actually appear anxious or even confused if a teacher or a family childcare provider were to join in their play. In some families, play is focused on teaching skills, and in others, it's all about creating warm bonds and having fun together. Or it could be a combination of both of those. We've talked about some variations, but we just want to highlight a few specific research examples to give you a better glimpse into the diversity of play across cultures.

Marie: These are really fun. The game of peekaboo is a popular game for adults and children across the world, but they also have cultural variations. In Japanese, Korean, and Italian families the surprise reappearance is accompanied by a silly unpredictable word.

Beth: I love that. In Tajikistan, which is a country in Central Asia, babies actually spend up to 20 hours a day in a tightly wrapped swaddle as part of the culture's galore cradling practice. Babies there often have little to no opportunities for play.

Marie: And social play varies across cultures too. In some cultures, and families, social play is emphasized more than playing with toys. This extends beyond adult caregivers and often includes older siblings, cousins, or neighborhood play.

Beth: These are just three examples to show how much play can vary. But because play varies, we want you to focus on the idea today that we cannot take this one-size-fits-all approach to how we understand and support children's playful learning.

Marie: One of the first things we need to do is think about our own assumptions and expectations around play. One assumption that adults sometimes make about infants, especially, is that they don't play or they're not ready for real play yet.

Beth: But we know that cannot be further from the truth. When an infant makes a funny face at you with their peer, when they're kicking their little legs out of mobile, or even chewing on a soft toy, they are playing.

Marie: Research is another area that informs our expectations and how we support play.

Beth: I know this firsthand as a former researcher but also know this can be problematic. In research, we often refer to the acronym WEIRD. It stands for Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic. Those are the societies that research is often based on and the lens through which many researchers over the years have viewed and understood their data. But if we only view play through this WEIRD lens, we miss some of those beautiful variations in how children play, and those variations in play across cultures.

Marie: We value different types of play differently whether we're aware of it or not. Within Western societies, WEIRD societies, adults often place a higher value on play that seems productive, that is artistic, creative, musical, dramatic, and play that tends to be less valued includes play fighting, playing in the rain, playing with conflict, there are issues like death or grief, repetitive play, daydreaming, and this reminds me of a quote about inclusive play. It says, "valuing the broad spectrum of play types means that the setting will be closer to accommodating children's different ways of being and expressing themselves."

Beth: That really highlights our values, they influence our learning space and the support that we provide.

Marie: Our attitudes and mindsets are consistently identified as the most important factors in adults' ability to effectively support inclusive play and shape the possibilities of children's play, especially with children with disabilities. Our own cultural experiences with play influence how we interpret body language, how children express themselves, what's acceptable or not, and what we think requires intervention or not, or what toys are appropriate for whom.

Beth: For example, some adults have expectations about gender roles in play. If a boy is playing dress-up, they might actually redirect them to something else because it makes them feel uncomfortable, not because there's anything wrong with it. And it goes beyond redirection. I also want you to think about what toys you're offering to babies and toddlers. Do you tend to offer girls one type of toy, and boys another type?

Marie: This is really important of being observant and curious about your own perspective, and how you approach different kinds of play is really critical for uncovering your own biases and practices. Do you intervene more often in certain types of play? Are you engaged or support certain types of play?

Beth: We encourage you to take time to investigate your own internal values and your experience around play and how this can influence how you approach play. Looking beyond our own personal assumptions and expectations is an important part of viewing and supporting play through an equity lens. Equity means the fair and just treatment to all children, families, and those who support them. Equity enables everyone to achieve their full potential. When we lead with equity, we see each child as a child first. A child is more than their ability level, past experiences, the language that they speak, or any other label.

Marie: And remember that each child is unique. Infants and toddlers engage in play in different ways, they develop skills at different rates, both for typical development and children with disabilities or suspected delays.

Beth: We can use our knowledge of child development and also understanding of each individual child to adapt playful learning experiences to meet children of different ability levels where they are. To foster play in all children, we need to think about access and participation. Increased access leads to a higher level of participation. We know there's actually a strong connection between participation and learning. When children don't engage with people and

activities, and materials in a meaningful way, their opportunity for learning can be impacted. This can be especially true for children with disabilities.

Marie: What strategies do we have to design an environment that provides access to participation in play? This includes making sure activities and engagements are physically accessible but also include a range of ways for the child to participate.

Beth: A great way to do this is to include loose parts and open-ended materials that can be explored in different ways. With open-ended materials, children get to decide how to play with them. Let's take a set of cups. One child might bang those cups together or choose to just carry that cup around.

Marie: Or another one might nest them while another one uses them to dump and fill. Another one might use it to give a doll a drink or appear, pretend to drink.

Beth: We'll talk more about open-ended play in a bit. But it's important to keep in mind that providing a variety of open-ended materials and those individualized supports gives each child the pathway to fully and independently participate in play, either on their own or with their peers. Let's think about infants who spend a lot of time on the floor, think about how materials can be made accessible for them.

We place toys on low shelves, we can put the visuals like mirrors and pictures of the infant's family on those low floor surfaces or on vertical surfaces that are low to the floor. We can also help families think about how objects and materials can be placed in their home for their infant or toddler to safely access.

Marie: Beyond the physical environment, we also want to think about the social environment and access and participation for social interactions. For toddlers, you might create opportunities for them to play next to their peers, and this can support their social development too. To get us thinking more about access and participation, we thought it'd be fun to play a short game of "I Spy." And because we're talking about fostering inclusive play, we want to invite you to think about ways to adapt I Spy to make it accessible to all.

Beth: Yes, let's do that. Let's think about what if you're working with a child who has visual impairment, how could you adapt this activity so the child can participate? Rather than I spy, how about a game of —

Marie: I hear. Rather than sight, you can engage other senses like hearing. Maybe I hear with my little ear something crinkly. What do you think made that sound?

Beth: I'm going to guess, was it a baby toy?

Marie: No. A straw wrapper.

Beth: What if that was either too easy or too challenging for the children that you're playing with? How could you adapt the activity even further? One thing you might do is to try some other sounds. You could strum on a guitar, pop some bubble wrap, or just tap your hands on a desk. You don't need to stop with sight or hearing, you could also adapt I Spy into a game of I Smell, I Taste, or even I Touch. The key here is considering how you can meet the needs of all the children that you're working with.

Marie: Just like we did in this game, it often means taking a multisensory approach and reimagining some of the activities that you may already do or creating new activities. The goal is for all children to have access to materials and activities to be able to fully participate in play across all of the learning environments. There is a framework called Universal Design for Learning, or UDL for short, that we can use to do just that.

Beth: UDL is based on research, and it can guide you as you create playful learning experiences and design your learning environments to support all infants and toddlers, including children with disabilities or suspected delays. We can think of this as an equity tool.

Marie: There are three principles of UDL, engagement, representation, and action and expression. For engagement, supporting engagement in learning by building on infant and toddler development and interest and providing choices. Representation means providing a variety of ways to learn new skills and information. Action and expression is allowing flexibility in how infants and toddlers demonstrate success and understanding.

Beth: We'll revisit all these today because we're going to use these principles to really guide our thinking about setting up the learning space and selecting materials to support play in all infants and toddlers. UDL is all about flexibility. In not only how children access materials and participate, but also in really focusing on children's individual strengths.

Marie: We don't want to limit children to a single way of participating.

Beth: Exactly. There's no one-size-fits-all approach to play and learning. By using these principles of UDL, we can help ensure that children can fully engage in play in meaningful, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate ways.

Marie: It's about being intentional about it as well.

Beth: Being intentional is going to carry through everything from planning activities, to selecting materials, and arranging the learning space. Before we dive into these three principles, we just want to mention that a big part of making play inclusive for all children is really to first learn about the children in your care or in your family caseload if you're a home visitor. Here are just some questions to consider. What are their likes and dislikes? What languages do they hear and speak at home? Does their family have cultural expectations around play? How do they prefer to communicate? And how does their family like to play?

Marie: These are important for understanding how to set up learning spaces, materials, learning activities to meet all infants' and toddlers' play needs. A lot of what you'll learn comes from simple observation and awareness. Notice how children engage in play on their own or with others. Notice how they navigate the learning space.

Beth: You might notice that some children prefer to spend longer periods of time engaged in solitary play. And that is okay. Even if a child does prefer to play on their own, just be sure to check in on them, and even join in their play sometimes throughout the day. You could also place the materials they enjoy playing with near their peers to support social play when they feel ready.

My own daughter has spent time throughout the day engaged in longer periods of solitary play since the time she was an infant. She also loves playing with other kids, but she really uses that solitary play time as downtime, especially if things are feeling a little too loud in other places and she can really just like get deep into whatever it is that's interesting her when she has that solitary play time.

Marie: Watching children play with materials can give insight into their cultural practices. For instance, in one study, researchers added a blanket to a classroom dramatic play area in Saudi Arabian, United States, and South African early childhood settings. They found that the children used the blankets in different ways, depending on their location. Boys in Saudi Arabia wore the blanket on their head as a traditional Arab headdress. In the US, children used it to cover a doll on a bed. In South Africa, children wrapped the doll in a blanket and carried it on their backs.

Beth: This is such a great example of using just a single material to support play across cultures. I love that. It also emphasizes the power of observation. Noticing how children are using different materials, notice when they're engaged and participating and showing confidence. This can help you identify ways to support them in other activities. This idea brings us back to our first UDL principle, multiple means of engagement. This principle is all about supporting children's engagement in playful learning by building on infant and toddler development and children's interests.

Marie: How could we apply this to play?

Beth: Think about what motivates an individual child and captures their attention. Ask yourself what is meaningful and culturally relevant to them. What will motivate them to play with materials more and explore more and to join in activities and engage with their peers?

Marie: Because we're talking about fostering inclusive play, we also want to ask how can I make this activity or these materials more accessible so all children can participate.

Beth: Yes, let's dive into these ideas a bit more.

Marie: Culture is at the heart of who we are. It influences everything from language, child-rearing practices to family structure, to how families view disabilities and their expectations

around play like we talked about earlier. And remember that not all people from one culture will act the same or have the same values or expectations. Showing cultural responsiveness means taking a strengths-based approach. Respect the role of culture in a child's development and how they play.

Beth: A key part of this is really connecting with families, having conversations with them, learning about their child's strengths and their families' cultures and values and expectations around play. Then use what you learn to create culturally responsive learning environments and to really feel belonging with children and families. This is true whether you're in a classroom, a family childcare, or on a home visit.

Marie: This relationship goes both ways, right? Take time to share with families what their child likes to play with in the learning space and what their strengths are in play.

Beth: These conversations can really shape a family's expectations in positive big ways. They might not realize some of the things that their child is able to do if they never tried until you share that they're doing it every day maybe in your learning space. Then after conversations, we just encourage you to honor children's cultures and their experiences and this is more than just checking that box like, "oh, I included this book or this artifact from a child's culture."

You really want to ask children and families how they like to play. Invite them into your learning community to share about their culture or traditions or ways that they enjoy playing if they feel comfortable. Continue to observe the child to get a better understanding of their interests. When we know more about children and families, we can make more meaningful connections for them and create playful learning experiences.

Marie: Those meaningful connections are what help motivate children. A quick note that meaning and culture can be tied together but they don't have to be. Infants and toddlers use play to make sense of their experience. They learn best when play is meaningful and relevant to them.

Beth: As you're observing children, think about the social and emotional connection you have with the infants and toddlers you work with too. Children, when they feel more secure in their space and relationships are going to be more likely to explore. They develop that sense of security and that connection with adults through an adults' responsive care.

Marie: Interest can be really different between child to child, also across development for the same child as they grow from infants to toddler. A child's gender, their temperament, life experiences, family culture, or even current popular characters or toys can influence what and how they like to play.

Beth: You want add items to the learning space that will spark a child's interest. Let's say you have a child who's been slow to warm up playing with their peers, you want to find out what they like to play with at home, so those conversations with families, and then incorporate some of those items in your space and see if that helps.

Marie: What about children who are dual language learners who don't share the language of other children in your learning space?

Beth: This is a question that we hear a lot. I like to say that the beauty of play is that children don't need language to play. Sure, they use it, but they can also interact with their peers using their actions and gestures and their eye gaze.

Marie: I'm also guessing that maybe some of you are curious about applying this to babies. Well, babies are known to have pretty strong preferences. They'll tell you what they like with their eyes and their cries and their wiggles and their giggles. Some babies might enjoy exploring objects with their hands while others prefer their mouth or feet, even how long they pay attention to something is a clue about what captures their interest. When you know how a child likes to play, you're in a better position to guide that play towards effective learning, and this is true for all ages. You want to recap some of the strategies that came up for the engagement principle and highlight a couple of new ones.

Beth: One of the big things that we've talked about is providing those choices during play so think materials that are accessible and meaningful, and culturally responsive. Children love making decisions about how they engage in play. Research shows that children tend to be more motivated to participate in activities when they're given choices.

Marie: Remember when providing choices, you can be strategic in what you offer. You could think about tying choices to a child's interest and avoid offering choices that might cause you more stress.

Beth: If you don't have a lot of time or you don't feel like you have the mental capacity to deal with a big mess on a particular day, then you don't have to offer something messy as a choice.

Marie: That's completely okay. That's also a great tip for home visitors to share with families too.

Beth: Providing choices, it's going beyond those materials and activities. We also want you to think about the learning space and whether children have opportunities to do things on their own or with their peers.

Marie: Physical accessibility is another important piece of engagement. Looking around your learning space, do all the children have space to move around and to engage on their own? And sometimes you might have to make modifications or small changes to the learning environment, including activities, materials, or interactions to support the participation of an individual child. Modifications are usually simple and easy to set up like providing an easel or paper in the art area. For some children, you might need to tape the paper down to the table or even to the floor to hold it in space. They can choose how to engage.

Beth: For home visitors, work with families to identify ways to modify the home and the group socialization environment. You might have to encourage parents' creative thinking here, especially if their home space is small. For example, can maybe this small piece of furniture or like a plant, can it be moved a little bit to create a bigger play space?

Marie: Lastly, we want to emphasize that you, the adults, may take on different roles to help infants and toddlers engage in play on their own and with each other. Adult support can look a variety of ways and it supports engagement and persistence, it can help complete play tasks or encouraging social interaction, and supporting verbal communication as well. It could look like stepping in directly, indirectly, or sometimes not at all.

Beth: You might support engagement by modeling these types of things in your interactions with children to help them develop new skills. Often, just a little bit of guidance like a question, a hint, a prompt, or even just "you got this" that will be enough for a child to engage in play independently.

Let's move on to our next principle, multiple means of representation. This principle is all about flexibility in the way information is presented. Think about how each child you work with, how they receive and understand information. Everyone from infants through adults, we all vary in how we process and learn best from information whether it's seeing it, hearing it, or touching it, or a mix of the three. Because of this, we really want to provide children with a variety of ways to access information that enables them to fully engage in play.

Marie: This is just what we did with the I Spy game when we kind of brought in all these different aspects of how to play.

Beth: Yes, but when possible, it can also be helpful to present different formats to children at the same time.

Marie: Absolutely. What might that look like?

Beth: Let's say that you're planning to sing the Wheels on the Bus in your learning space. This is great for your auditory learners. You can also provide those corresponding motions for the different parts of the song like the doors on the bus go open and shut for your visual learners.

Marie: What about the kids who are tactile learners?

Beth: You might provide a toy bus or wear a cutout and laminate different parts of the bus so children can explore them with their hands. Or, you know, children might even pretend to ride a bus. With these options, children can engage in this playful learning experience at least three different ways.

Marie: You want to be flexible in the opportunities we provide for children during play.

Beth: Definitely. Representation is all about how information is presented. It's important to provide representation in many different forms that meet the needs of children in your setting.

This can help with communication during play too. Communication can occur through multiple means. Not only spoken or visual but also nonverbal as well.

This is true for children and adults. Let's think about babies. Their first play is often in their social interactions with us. They smile, they make a funny face, maybe they stick their tongue out, make some of those silly sounds, hoping that we will respond.

Marie: Our body language, our facial expressions, and eye gaze are all practices that you can incorporate working with children. Home visitors can help families identify nonverbal cues they already use and might want to try in the home. Maybe turning the lights on and off, or using music or musical sound can be a way to begin transitions or to get everybody's attention.

Beth: I love this as a strategy for home visitors to share with the families too. Help them find something playful like a favorite song that their child will respond to.

Marie: Adding music and dimming the lights can be used beyond group settings as well.

Beth: Then if we're thinking about a daily schedule, you might add photos of children engaged in different activities and routines. You can also add a photo of each child to their cubby. Or for a play task, you could put outlines of the different materials on shelves to help toddlers learn where materials go as they learn to help clean up from their play.

Marie: You could consider including printed pictures or drawings and words together to translate some of the words into languages that the children speak, and then make the connection between words, pictures, and drawings together.

Beth: This could also mean learning some survival words yourself to help bridge that communication and access for children who are dual language learners. And for home visitors, help families identify what communication tools would best fit their child's needs.

Marie: This also might look like learning American sign language signs and incorporating them into daily routines or into play. ASL provides access for everyone regardless of what language they speak. Another option is to adapt the picture exchange communication system or use augmented and alternative communication devices. Both these systems use pictures as a way for children to communicate their desires and needs. Through these types of systems, they can be used with all children to support engagement and participation.

Beth: For example, if you have a picture or packs of crayons near the art area, a child who wants to color with a peer could pick up that photo and take the picture card and hand it to their peer to show that they'd like to color with them. This practice can be especially helpful for children who are dual language learners, children with disabilities, and even for children who tend to be shy.

It's just a wonderful communication tool that supports peer play without needing to rely on spoken communication. Our last principle today is multiple means of action and expression.

This one is all about setting up a flexible learning space that supports children in expressing themselves in different ways.

Marie: Play is the way that children express themselves. But as we talked about, play varies. Each child will engage and express themselves in different ways during play.

Beth: You might see children use toys in unexpected ways. For example, a child might bring blocks from the block area to the play kitchen to stir in a pot for some soup.

Marie: Some of you might think but the blocks belong in the block area. This brings us back to our assumptions and beliefs about play. We encourage you to have an open mindset and that play might look different than what you plan for or have previously experienced. And that's okay.

Beth: During play, infants and toddlers are going to express themselves in different ways. Their play may be verbal or nonverbal. Some infants you might notice are still or sit still during play while others enthusiastically move their arms and kick their legs.

Marie: For toddlers, they might use pictures or signs to communicate or do so through their actions. They might express themselves through song or music, or be more physically active, or maybe they prefer quiet activities like chewing on toys, doing puzzles, or art. In fact, most children use many of these approaches to express themselves.

Beth: One of the ways that you can support children's developing skills during play is to continue to model these different skills and let them practice it. This can be especially helpful for younger children who are still developing skills or even children of different ability levels.

Marie: I want to tie this back into the expectations about what we have about what play should look like. We know our expectations can have big impacts, especially for kids who have a disability or who are neurodiverse. For example, a toddler who twirls a leaf in their hand or waves a ribbon in front of them over and over may not seem like play, but it is indeed their way of playing and enjoying the motion or movement, or maybe just the time alone to be engaged without expectations. Observing what activities bring children joy and peace are important to recognize and support. These types of play methods are valid and don't necessarily need to match their peers.

Beth: To further support children's play, adults can describe how they're playing sometimes through this engagement. You're not only making connections with them but also supporting their language development. One of the keys here is having various materials available so children have the opportunity to choose how to play based on their own abilities, interests, and strengths.

Marie: One baby might enjoy turning the pages while looking through a soft book, while another baby shows their interest by chewing on it. And this is a totally okay way for babies to play.

Beth: Remember that children express themselves through play to meet their own individual needs.

Marie: Like we said before, open-ended materials are a wonderful way to let children choose how to express themselves and to explore materials during play.

Beth: Imagine all the different ways that a child might use a paper towel roll. Everything from art to drumsticks to a tunnel for cars.

Marie: We want to dabble into make-believe with everyday objects for a minute. Look around your space, and using only something in your room that's close, let's pretend for a minute. Select an item and reimagine a way to use it.

Beth: My pen might become a hairbrush.

Marie: I found this little like satchel and it could be like going on a little vacation. Or if I open it up, it could be a little hat.

Beth: My straw is a slithering snake.

Marie: We hope this provided a little bit of inspiration as you think about fostering inclusive play for infants and toddlers.

Beth: We just want to spend our last little bit of time together here, bringing these three UDL principles together to think more comprehensively about what it means for your learning environments. UDL is all about making sure your learning space works for everyone. For home visitors, help families adapt their space to best meet their child's needs. We want to create environments that embrace every learner's story.

Marie: This requires planning and taking the time to learn about children and their family's values, expectations, culture, and practices. Then you can find creative ways to integrate those pieces into the children's play environments.

Beth: For home visitors, help think with families about just small changes they can make and they don't have to be permanent. They could be something as simple as using clear containers so a child can see what's inside to play with. Moving those toys to a lower shelf so they don't constantly have to ask their family to get something for them, and they can play more independently.

Marie: There are three components of learning environments that we want you to consider. The physical, the social, and the temporal.

Beth: Let's start with the physical. Physical is everything from furniture and the layout of the space and outdoors too, not just indoors. What's on the floor, but also think background noise, the lighting, and how materials are stored and organized. Infants and toddlers should be able to safely access and fully participate in play in the learning space.

Marie: And one really fun way to do this is to take the child's experience. Get down on the floor and experience the space using your five senses the way an infant or toddlers do. You might lay on your tummy and crawl around, lay on your back like an infant does, you know, what does the lighting feel like, what's up there, can you see anything up there? You know, for the crawling and mobile or walking infant, notice if there are safe places to pull themselves up or to safely climb. And home visitors can encourage families to do this in their home too.

Beth: Really we just want you to put yourself in the child's shoes here and take their perspective. And then also think about mobile and non-mobile children sharing a space because we want to ensure that nonverbal children have protected areas to play as well.

Marie: In addition to physical mobility, we want to think about the auditory part of the environment. Like, imagine a child who's sensitive to loud noise or who is hard of hearing. When there's too much background noise, it could be really hard for children to focus or notice play cues from their peers or adults. All children should feel comfortable to play and explore in their environment.

Beth: We also want infants and toddlers and their families to see themselves in the learning space. One of the questions we encourage you to ask yourself is can I see children in the space even when they're not there? In other words, are there materials and photos and books and music and languages that represent all the diverse cultural experiences that each child brings to the learning space?

Marie: We also need to think about the social environment, which we talked a little bit about before. The social environment focuses on interactions between children and their peers and adults, as well as relationships between education staff and families. We know that relationships are at the heart of social and emotional development. When young children have a warm, trusting relationship with their caregivers, they develop the confidence to explore and play, and form relationships with their peers. As we've talked about earlier, learning from families, not only helps us better support infants and toddlers but also builds belonging with children and families.

Beth: As you consider the social environment, think about setting up opportunities for both independent play as well as parallel or play directly with peers. Observe children to figure out their play goals, and then find experiences that they enjoy to help keep them engaged. Remember that joining in play with peers can feel tricky to some children so you could also model inviting another child to play through your own words or actions. Remember your supportive guidance can lead to more inclusive play environments.

Marie: The last component we want to mention is the temporal environment. This refers to managing transitions in daily routines. One of the big considerations here is helping children move between play and other parts of their routine. Are there some ways that we can support infants and toddlers through transitions to and from play?

Beth: Visual schedules are a great way to show children what to expect before and after play. As we talked about earlier, you can play music or even encourage movement to help make those transitions a little bit easier.

Marie: The music and movement and adding visual timers are helpful to show how much time they have left until they have to transition.

Beth: Managing the temporal environment is also about making sure that infants and toddlers have enough time to both follow and develop their interests while they play. Remember that the amount of time that they're going to play is going to change and vary from infancy through toddlerhood as their wake times during the day increases.

Marie: We want to end today by encouraging to think of your learning space as a whole. It should provide mirrors so children can feel they belong. See their culture, family, and themselves, the materials and activities. But it also should provide windows into the world so children can see the importance of celebrating diversity. They are exposed to difference, different people, places, cultures, communities they might not otherwise experience. I love this quote from NAEYC, "in diverse and inclusive learning communities one child's mirrors are another child's windows, making for wonderful opportunities for collaborative learning."

Beth: I love that quote too. We just want to encourage you to think about one thing you would like to try or expand to support the play of the children that you serve. Remember when we foster inclusive play that meets the needs of all infants and toddlers, we're really building belonging in our learning spaces with the children and families that we work with. Children and families feel they belong when their individual differences are recognized, accepted, and supported.

And remember, we cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting inclusive play. Flexibility will be your friend. Meet infants and toddlers where they are to create these spaces that build on their strengths, that are accessible, culturally responsive, and meaningful to them. Thank you for your time and attention today, and for all that you do on behalf of children.