

Research on the Go Podcast: Supporting Young Children with Disabilities or Suspected Delays

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Allie Canavan: Hello and welcome to "Research on the Go", a podcast where we explore some of the latest research in the field of child development, its implications, and practical applications. I'm Allie Canavan.

Marley Jarvis: Hi, and I'm Marley Jarvis. And we're both from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning. And we're based at the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle.

Allie: In this podcast, we want to not only talk about the research itself but also to provide a space where we can share some ideas about ways to use the research to support grantees. So, what are we talking about today, Marley?

Marley: So, today, we're going to talk about tips and strategies for supporting young children with disabilities or suspected delays, and some of the things we're going to cue in here on are individualizing environments and interactions and also building a program culture that celebrates our differences.

Allie: Great. Let's dive in. Where do you think is a good place to start?

Marley: So, first, I think it's important that we work to shift our thinking a little bit. It's so common for adults to think about sort of generally supporting children with so-called standard care and then making special accommodations to meet the needs of children with disabilities or delays. But the reality is that all children need individualized care based on their specific needs, interests, backgrounds, and ability.

Allie: Right. Absolutely. Children with disabilities, just like all children, are children first.

Marley: Exactly. So, every child is unique, and we really need to make sure that we are individualizing our care for each child.

Allie: And of course, children with disabilities or delays may need some extra supports so that they're learning alongside their peers.

Marley: Right. And this is the goal. So, we want children with disabilities or suspected delays to be learning really wherever their peers are learning. And inclusion really benefits all children.

Allie: Absolutely. Both children with and children without disabilities.

Marley: Yeah, there's a ton of research that tells us how beneficial inclusion is for all children.

Allie: What are some of those examples?

Marley: Sure. So, for one, children with disabilities benefit from the support and the modeling that they get from their peers. And children without disabilities, they're benefiting from seeing that we all have unique strengths. We all have different skills and different needs.

Allie: Definitely, and this can help build empathy and community too. It's really a lot of learning going on for all children, isn't there?

Marley: Yeah, absolutely.

Allie: OK, so let's talk about individualized environments. What does this mean to you?

Marley: Sure. So, when I'm saying environments, to be clear, I'm talking about learning environments. So, these are the spaces that children learn in throughout their day.

Allie: All right. So, spaces like the classroom or like child care centers?

Marley: Yeah, but also, it includes the home and any community spaces, so this is particularly important for home-based programs. So, learning environments include all of these spaces that children are learning in throughout their day. And especially for infants and toddlers, we're thinking about these daily routines.

Allie: Yeah, absolutely. Learning happens everywhere.

Marley: And so, these learning environments ... We have to expand what we're thinking about beyond just classroom and child care centers, but also remember that this includes the materials and the toys in those spaces too.

Allie: And what do you mean by individualizing environments?

Marley: Well, we want to make sure that the learning environment and all of those materials and toys that are in the learning environment, that they're accessible to all children. So, that's just what individualizing the environment means. We need to make changes, adaptations, modifications, and so on to support this.

Allie: Absolutely, and I like to say that adults should continuously be taking almost a scan of their spaces and materials, just sort of taking note of any areas or materials that children may be having issues accessing or playing with.

Marley: Right. Yes, the kind of visual scan of these spaces – that's a great suggestion. And when you notice those things, that's your cue, right, to make some modifications.

Allie: Mm hmm. Absolutely. OK, so what might this look like? Let's say we are supporting an older infant with maybe vision impairments. He loves to listen to adults read out loud to him,

but how can we support this child in engaging some other senses during book reading like other children might get when they're looking at the pictures?

Marley: Mm hmm. Yeah. So, we could think about how we could add in some other sensory experiences, so maybe like touch. You might think about adding in squares of fabric or fake fur or even some, like, softer sandpaper that isn't too rough for those little fingers. [Allie Laughing] And yeah, you can just glue these different materials just right onto book pages. You can do this in kind of a fun way that might complement the story. If the story is about being at the beach, that's a great place for that sandpaper.

Allie: [Laughter] Yeah, I could see that being super fun for all infants and toddlers, honestly.

Marley: Right. Yeah, it's a really fun thing to play with.

Allie: All right, so let's move on to your second key theme here in supporting children with disabilities. Can you talk a little bit about individualizing interactions?

Marley: Sure, so just like we need to individualize our learning environments, we also need to pay attention to adapting our interactions with young children to best meet their needs.

Allie: Right, right. And individualizing our interactions really just means that we're cued in to each child, right?

Marley: Right, and one of the key ways that we build relationships, really, is through sensitive, responsive communication.

Allie: Definitely. Definitely. And our interactions with children with disabilities or suspected delays may look a little different than our interactions with their typically developing peers.

Marley: Yeah, adults have to be patient. We have to give plenty of time for a child to respond, and we also have to be flexible about what that response looks like. So, I like to think of this as broadening our communication strategies beyond just words.

Allie: Yeah, that's super important. Tell me more about what you mean by that.

Marley: Well, how do you communicate with young children generally? So, especially thinking about ones that can't talk to us using words. What are you looking for?

Allie: So, we might be looking for a smile or tears or crying or maybe some kind of gesture or movement.

Marley: Right, there's so much going on that is communicating with us, and these can also be some really wonderful examples that we can use in our communication with young children. So, for example, research shows that imitation can be a great way to connect with young children with autism.

Allie: Oh, yeah. Mm hmm.

Marley: So, if a child makes a gesture or vocalization, you might try imitating them back playfully. They might be asking for something, so it's important to pay attention to their cues and see what they might need. But maybe they're also just trying to connect or play with you, so pay attention to their cues and respond accordingly.

Allie: You are absolutely right. There are so many different social cues that we use in our day-to-day communication, and it is so important to highlight this aspect. What other examples do you have about broadening communication strategies?

Marley: Sure, so another piece from research is that infants who are deaf may pay particular attention to our eyes and where we're looking, so this eye gaze can be another great communication strategy. So, with a child, actually look at whatever it is you're talking about and then see if the child follows your gaze to also look at that. And then you can sort of flip that. You can use a child's eyes gaze – so, where they're looking – to tell you what they might be interested in in that moment.

Allie: Excellent, and speaking of children who are deaf, I also wanted to mention that we know from research that learning a second language, like ASL, will not cause a language delay. It's really important that we're providing home language supports for all of the children in our care.

Marley: Yes, that's so important. Thanks for bringing that up. And, also, don't forget about using assistive technology devices. This includes things like augmentative communication devices, and they can be a really great way to support children with disabilities to communicate with us.

Allie: Right, and these can be super simple too, like a picture board. But they can also really make a difference, even for younger children like infants and toddlers.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. Really, the end goal here is to allow for a child to communicate with you in whatever way they prefer.

Allie: Definitely. So, we've come to our last theme, which is building a program culture that is supporting our natural differences.

Marley: Yes, so this is an essential part of responsive caregiving. Programs should focus on honoring and affirming children's identities, and this includes many things – race, language, culture, and ability – rather than just acceptance or tolerance of our differences. So, this is so key because our identities can be healing.

Allie: Oh, so right, and I know a lot of adults really struggle with this. We've seen the parent or the teacher that gets super flustered when a child loudly asks in public about someone's wheelchair, for example.

Marley: Yes, children always seem to like adjust the volume with whatever they know is going to make us uncomfortable.

[Both laugh]

Marley: So, yeah, the response that the adult might have might be anger or embarrassment. What that response is teaching the child is that the difference that they just noticed – so like, the need for a wheelchair – is something to be ashamed of.

Allie: Mm hmm. Yeah.

Marley: So, instead, adults should calmly help children make sense of the natural differences between people and also to be sure to address any stereotypes directly that might come up.

Allie: Yes. Yes. Definitely. We know from research that not talking about differences like ability or race actually increases biased thinking in children because we're leaving them to sort out the meaning behind the things that they see for themselves.

Marley: Right, and that's key, so they see and notice differences naturally. And children are noticing our differences from early infancy, so really early on. Because of this, it's important to talk about it and to affirm and celebrate our differences rather than pretend we don't see them.

Allie: Right. Right. Where should we look for more information on this topic?

Marley: So, remember that in early learning settings, we are serving young children with disabilities or delays that often can't tell us directly about their experiences. So, it's really important to read firsthand perspectives and opinions from people with disabilities, and of course, remember that no two people's experiences will be the same.

Allie: Yes, definitely, and reading firsthand narratives of people with many different identities is really a very important part of our work in general, and this includes ability, race, gender, class, and many of the other intersecting identities of not only the children, but also the families that we have in our programs.

Marley: Right. Yeah, and I'd also recommend looking into an emerging field of study called DisCrit. So, that's D-I-S-C-R-I-T. DisCrit. And that name comes from the two fields of study that it borrows from. So, disability studies and critical race theory. So, DisCrit highlights in particular some of the ways that people of color who also have disabilities can be particularly excluded and harmed. So, we've been talking about building a program culture that is identity affirming as one of these key ways to support children with disabilities. And so, in this vein, DisCrit is a really useful framework that can help improve practices in early childhood.

Allie: That really is such a useful way to frame this particular subject. Now, those of us who work in the field of early learning have such unique opportunities to support children and families in really building a more just society for all children, and it's really empowering.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. And I want to also mention that we need to be paying attention to our use of ableist language and how that kind of sneaks into our language and how that can impact others.

Allie: Absolutely. And if this is a new term for our listeners, ableist language includes language that is maybe offensive to people with disabilities or language that is derogatory or negative about a disability or a delay.

Marley: This can include things that are still relatively common. So, things like saying, "That's crazy" or "That's lame", which can negatively impact individuals with cognitive or physical disabilities, for example. And ableist language furthers negative cultural stereotypes that exist out there about people with disabilities or suspected delays.

Allie: That is definitely true. Language really tends to shape our perception, and when we use things like a disability as an insult, what we're actually saying is that there is something wrong with someone with a disability, even if that isn't necessarily our intention.

Marley: Right, and it's so important that we continue to learn about the impacts of the words that we use. And shifting our language can take some time to feel more natural to us, but it's important for us all to do.

Allie: It really is important, and it really is just part of this larger ongoing process of learning and growing so that we can really do our best to support all of the children and families that are in all of our programs.

Marley: Exactly. So, again, our goal is not just to have a program culture that is accepting or tolerant of people who may be different from us, but to affirm, support, and honor these differences. And we want all children to learn in supportive, identity-affirming programs.

Allie: Definitely. Definitely. OK, we are coming to the end of our time today. We have talked about just a few of the many ways that adults can support young children with disabilities or suspected delays, including individualizing environments and interactions, as well as building a program culture that both honors and affirms children's many, many intersecting identities.

Marley: Support programs in reading firsthand perspectives and opinions from people with disabilities. In addition, consider creating opportunities for training around DisCrit, which is the intersection between disability studies and critical race theory.

Allie: And in addition, provide support for programs in individualizing their environments, including toys and materials so that all children have access. Spend some time talking about broadening communication strategies to include social cues and assistive technology devices.

Marley: For more information on practices that support children with disabilities or suspected delays, visit the ECLKC and search for disabilities.

Allie: We hope you join us for our other episodes in this podcast series, "Research on the Go," for more information about the practical applications of some of the latest research.

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