

Preschool Coffee Break: Episode 2

Peter Pizzolongo: Welcome to Teacher Time Coffee Break. I'm Peter Pizzolongo.

Dr. Alex Figueras-Daniel: And I'm Dr. Alex Figueras-Daniel.

Peter: Hello, Alex.

Alex: Hi.

Peter: This Teacher Time Coffee Break gives us an opportunity to talk one on one with our Teacher Time expert and answer questions we received during the Teacher Time for Preschoolers episode: Creating a Responsive Environment for Young Children. If you haven't seen this episode, make sure you take a few minutes to watch it. We received some questions during the episode, and so now we'll take an opportunity to—I'll ask the questions and Alex will answer the questions.

So, during the episode you talked about setting an appropriate environment for young children. It's important for us to think about having child-size furniture, having a schedule and routines that works for preschool children, having an environment that is warm— children feel comfortable so they can take risks—and having an environment that's accessible for children with different abilities, different cultures, different ages. Well, a family childcare provider, Gwen, was watching and she asked, "So, how does this work in a family childcare home?"

Alex: So, I think that's a great question. And I think that in lots of ways it may even be easier, more rewarding to do in a family childcare center. I think that the main piece in a family home is thinking about varying ages. It's I think more likely that you would have a more wide range of ages, and so thinking about materials that are likely to stimulate infants, toddlers and preschoolers while still being mindful that they may not be able to all be out at the same time.

And so, the other piece is that while in a classroom-based setting you would have a more standardized routine and schedule. A family childcare setting would probably not have that, and so I think that there's more to think about in terms of adjusting the schedule and being intentional so that when you know that infants may be resting, that that might be a good time to read or do fine motor activities with older children.

Peter: Well, the other thing about a family childcare home is it's a home, so there are more things there that are home things that you can use as learning materials. I was in a family childcare home recently, and there was a bin that had these really large plastic bottle caps—you know the kinds that come with laundry detergent. They were all scrubbed. They were clean and they were safe. And I was so excited when I saw that to see that a family childcare provider was using these home-like materials. Unfortunately, the provider didn't understand my excitement and she thought I was upset, so we did have to explain to her that, "No, this is really a good thing to have." So, we'd like to see a lot more of that happening in family childcare homes.

Alex: Sure.

Peter: The next question that came in was based on the video that was in the Teacher Time episode. The first video that we showed there was a dramatic play scene, and towards the end of the video a child tried to join in. And a little boy said, "This place is full." So, that classroom obviously has a system for limiting the number of children per center. Teacher Jim was watching, and he asked, "Is that okay?"

Alex: So I think this is a question that can have lots of different answers. I think it might be okay, particularly I think in the beginning of the year when teachers and children are still negotiating a new environment and maybe you have a limitation of space. But I think that there are lots of things to consider to think about how you can maybe avoid that situation all together.

For example, providing lots of interesting opportunities and lots of different centers or areas so that children don't feel inclined to all be doing the one cool thing that there is to do, and to have popular things—have multiple examples throughout the classroom as often as possible. And I think that while—In reality, there are limitations with space, and sometimes I think teachers do need to have systems like that. In those cases I think another powerful and important thing to think about is to help children have the language to negotiate those scenarios among each other in way that's not hurtful so that the person asking to come in doesn't necessarily feel slighted or rejected.

So, giving that person the words to use, perhaps this could be a small group activity. "What do we do when there is a center full?" or, "What do we do when we want to go somewhere where maybe it's not the best time to be?" I think different curriculum have different ideas about this and different systems. But generally I think it's a matter of your children and the space and your materials. It's sort of an individual problem.

Peter: Yeah. And I think helping children to have those words, so instead of just saying, "I want to join in," and somebody says, "No," and then I walk away maybe the child would have those words to say, "Are you going to be finished playing here soon, because I really would like to come? Are you going to go to the block area or someplace else?" So, you can help a child to negotiate the way into that center.

Alex: Sure.

Peter: And then a related question that came in is, "Is it okay to close one of the centers in a classroom?"

Alex: Again, thinking back on the episode that we just filmed, I think the ideas that we presented with communicating first--the idea of communicating to the children that this is their space, that they should feel comfortable and happy there and safe, to take risks. That was the first idea. And the second one being about what the materials can actually teach. I think that closing areas does slightly undermine those two goals if we were thinking about high-quality environments.

Again, the idea that children's things sort of always belong to them in the classroom is important, and obviously they need lots of time to learn how to use things. But I think once we really allow children to feel confident and autonomous, they do take ownership of their things. I think that they can be allowed to play with things that may be messier, because they do know how to clean them up and it shouldn't create a large problem.

The other piece is that, again, limiting the time that they have to have access to those materials while they're in this program, whichever that might be, does limit their opportunities to learn from those materials, which they may or may not have access to once they leave their program.

Peter: Yeah, yeah. So the last question that we have is related to the homework that Judi gave. She said to think about the children in your group who have a varied range of content knowledge in one or more of the domains or subdomains, and then use what you know about the children using the tools you currently use and determine what they might be ready to learn next. So, we got a question from Sonya, and she asked, "So how do I start? Can you tell me some more about that?"

Alex: Sure. So I think a good starting point is to think about the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, and think about just a general trajectory for development for the children that you're serving, and then to think about the assessment tool as sort of a second part of that. And so I think that, if we think about the ELOF as a way to have some general goals and to have a general thought process about where to start and where to end with the group in large form, the assessment tool is really what allows the teacher to focus with a fine tooth comb on individual children and where they are specifically so that then you can plan very intentionally on what scaffolds and supports they need to move along the continuum.

And so I think that, thinking of this in terms of another analogy, you could think of taking your child to the doctor and having these growth curves, let's say the pediatrician is always telling you what percentile your child falls in, and they monitor this since birth, but while children are growing along their own curves, the doctor does weigh and measure them, and those are the scales that we use to make sure that things are moving the way that they should or if there is something that we should do to change it, the doctor will also tell us that based on what the measurements say.

So, I think that using the assessment tool in the same way in the classroom really allows the teacher to specifically know where children are along the continuum and how they can maybe think about planning what to do next, what to put in the classroom, what to offer in a small group activity or in a family home, what other materials to take out of the closet.

Peter: Yeah, and that goes along with what we know about developmentally appropriate practice, that when a teacher is deciding what do I do with this group of children with each child, that the teacher has to look at the core considerations and look first and say, "What is typical child development and the information that you get from a tool such as the ELOF? And then what do I know about each individual child? What do I know about the social and cultural context in which each child lives?" so that gives you that individual information. So, you put those together, and that's how you can plan your environment.

Alex: Absolutely.

Peter: So, that works really well. So thank you very much, Alex.

Alex: Thank you.

Peter: This is wonderful as always, and I hope that you all enjoyed hearing our questions from the field and the answers that we provided. Remember, when you watch a Teacher Time episode, you have an opportunity to ask questions, which we'll respond to on the next Coffee Break. So, it was great having you all with us, and I hope to see you on the next Teacher Time. Good bye.

