

Research on the Go Podcast: Responsive Learning Environments

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Amelia Bachleda: 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 Amelia Bachleda.

Marley Jarvis: Hello, and I'm Marley Jarvis. We are 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.

Amelia: In this podcast, we want to not only talk about the research itself, but also to provide a space where we can talk a little more deeply about ways to incorporate it into your work supporting grantees.

Marley: Today, we're going to talk about learning environments, the spaces we create for children and families.

Amelia: Let's dive right in by thinking about what we mean when we say a "learning environment." Marley, are we just talking about classroom spaces?

Marley: Oh, yeah, great question. I get this all the time. Learning environments are not just limited to classroom spaces. We really need to be thinking about all the spaces that children are spending time in throughout their day, so daily routines, daily activities – these are all learning environments.

Amelia: So, not just classrooms, right? We can think about all sorts of spaces where we learn. It might be at the post office. It could be outdoor areas. It could be in homes, play spaces.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. So, this is a great place to support home visitors, as well; so, you can help them think about learning environments as including things beyond just the home; so, any group socialization spaces, maybe community spaces that a family might interact with; so, things like play groups or places of worship or even story time at the library.

Amelia: Right, which is such a rich learning experience for a child. So, we've talked a little bit about what a learning environment is, but let's go one step further. What does it mean for a learning environment to be "responsive"?

Marley: Yeah, that's a great question. So, it's not just the learning environment, but it's really important that we're working to support responsive learning environments, and this means that they are welcoming, nurturing, and both emotionally and physically safe spaces, importantly, that support the development of all young children.

Amelia: And another piece that I really want to bring up here is that sometimes we focus too heavily on those physical materials that are in an environment.

Marley: Right, yeah, so those toys, the materials, the equipment, all of those things we spend so much time thinking about for very good reason — these are all really important — but it's

certainly not the only thing that we need to be thinking about in building a responsive learning environment.

Amelia: Right, so when we're talking to grantees about building this responsive learning environment, thinking about more than just those physical objects in a room — support grantees in thinking about the overall "emotional environment" of a space that they create. We started thinking a little bit about what an emotional environment is, but, Marley, I'd love to talk about this a little bit more. Do you have some tips about creating an emotional environment that you want to share?

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. So, a really great place to start is in helping grantees think about how to make their learning environments feel more like home, and this means also being inclusive of culture.

Amelia: And I think that word that you just said, "home," is so important here, right

Marley: Mm-hmm, yes. Absolutely.

Amelia: When you are in a space that feels homey or cozy, how do you feel? Usually, we feel welcomed, engaged, and a homelike environment encourages programs to be inclusive of all the different ages, abilities, cultures, and languages of children and families they work with.

Marley: Right, yeah. That's so important and such a big part of helping make responsive learning environments, because, remember, we're not just thinking about the physical materials but setting up that emotional environment that supports all young children.

Amelia: Right, and one of the things that we can think about is what items or materials or toys that we can use to incorporate that might be typical of children's home or community. And we were just talking about how creating an environment is more than just the objects than you put in it, but, again, that doesn't mean that thinking about the items, materials, aren't important. They can be a really powerful signal that helps children recognize something familiar, engage with something that makes them feel welcome and right at home.

Marley: Yeah, it's so important. I think we also need to make sure that we are thinking about that with our outside spaces, as well.

Amelia: Yeah, and there's a lot of things that we can do when we think about outside spaces. You know, sometimes we just think about outside, "Well, it's — it's outside. There's trees. What can I do with it?" I remember you were telling me an example that you'd heard of an Early Head Start program in Alaska, I believe, that did a really nice job of this. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Marley: Yeah, so, what they did is they incorporated play structures outside the center, and these play structures resembled traditional architecture styles not just of any tribes, but the tribes of children in that program.

Amelia: I can just imagine the children having this in-depth learning experience that's tied to something they may be familiar with, their culture, and getting to explore and play freely in this really meaningful environment.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely, and this can extend beyond just culture but thinking about what activities or things each child might be familiar with, so let's say, perhaps, a child might live in a city where they use public transportation a lot. Maybe, they and their family take the bus every day. So, can you add in a play bus stop or something like that?

Amelia: Right, and, you know, creating a play bus stop may feel a little overwhelming, but you could even think about, on a sunny day, doing it outside in sidewalk chalk or maybe using that blue painter's tape to make a little bus-stop area inside in the free-play area. And then, maybe you could add other things like Metro Cards for children to use and dump-and-fill activities or in dramatic play — maybe even a little bus driver's hat. That could be really fun.

Marley: Yeah, so there's a lot of really, really great ways to bring in — you're just thinking about what children are going to be familiar with in their day-to-day outside of the programs and bringing that in.

Amelia: Right. I think, also, having all of these just diverse, meaningful, relevant materials in a learning environment, this ends up being a really great strategy for children learning more than one language; and one of the reasons for this is that there's just so many varied and familiar things that a child can go point to or they can go get and bring back to the adult, and this can really help them communicate.

Marley: Absolutely. With so much to choose from and so much that's engaging, it really invites children to explore and express themselves.

Amelia: And it's really important in supporting grantees in thinking about how to know what materials are relevant.

Marley: Right, right. It can be easy to just say, you know, "These are materials I use all the time. The kids love them." But we really need to think more deeply about that, think about connecting with families and community members so that we really know and we're not making assumptions about what we think might be important.

Amelia: Right, yeah, that's really important. So, support grantees in making those connections, those meaningful connections with families, or even more broadly, community members around the center; so these kinds of conversations can help programs ensure that children not only feel comfortable and welcomed, but that they really can see themselves.

Marley: Which is so important. We all know what it's like to really feel seen, right? You know when you have an experience, an interaction where you feel like that other person really sees you and respects you, and that's what we really want to create for our children, their families, their communities, so that they can feel not only seen but welcomed and really able to engage in a learning environment that is culturally and linguistically responsive.

Amelia: Absolutely. We've already covered a lot about engaging environments, but are there other things that we should be considering when we're creating a learning environment that's responsive?

Marley: Yeah, so it's kind of a big topic area, and one of the things that I like to focus on, sort of a guiding key theme, is trying to get environments so that they're engaging for children, of

course, but thinking about this balance of creating responsive learning environments that are engaging but not overwhelming.

Amelia: Right, and I think we've all been into a learning environment before where it just feels a little overwhelming — and not just overwhelming for the children, but also overwhelming for the adults. We know what that feels like, right?

Marley: Walk in, and immediately think, "I need a nap." [Laughs]

Amelia: Right, right.

Marley: So, this is so important, and research backs this up. We know that very high levels of stimuli — so think of things like tons of color or lots of noise or even just the sheer number of people in a room. These things can disrupt children's learning and even affect their mood and behavior.

Amelia: Absolutely.

Marley: So, when children are feeling supported and engaged — so of course we want that environment to be engaging, but also supported and not overwhelmed — this nice balance.

Amelia: Right.

Marley: When we can strike that balance, this can often reduce stress for children and even reduce behaviors that they might exhibit that we find challenging as adults.

Amelia: Right, it's better for everybody.

Marley: It really is, yes. [Laughs]

Amelia: And one of the things we can do is to help programs encourage flexible use of their space to be responsive to different children with varying needs, interests, ages, and abilities, right? Like, what are some things that might — that come to mind when we're thinking about flexible uses of space?

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. So, what we mean by this is just making it so that every child and adults, as well, can navigate the space in a way that is supporting what they need that day, where they are developmentally, what their interests are, and so forth, so each child can kind of, to the best of their ability, choose where they are within that space, what materials they're interacting with, and taking quiet time when they need it.

Amelia: Right, and if all of this talk about creating an environment that isn't overwhelming is feeling overwhelming, there's a couple different things that we can think about, right? So, if you have Environment Rating Scales or ERS data that's available to you, that can be really helpful. Otherwise, help programs take a visual scan of their learning environment. Are there spots that children can seek out a quiet space as needed?

Marley: Right, exactly.

Amelia: OK, so, again, creating an environment that's less overwhelming, that has more opportunities for children to engage in these sort of longer-term, meaningful interactions with objects and people. What are your suggestions for creating an environment that does that, Marley?

Marley: Yeah, I think one of the easiest things you can help programs start to implement is making sure that their spaces have physical or even just visual boundaries; so, this helps children and adults [chuckles] know where spaces begin and end. You can help them make sure that there's places in those learning environments, that there are areas for high activity levels, but then also areas for more quiet or solo activities.

Amelia: Right, and we don't want to say that we can't have that big energy, that loud fun, right? It's just about creating choices and spaces where children can choose to engage or choose to have more of a quiet time — whatever suits their needs and their mood right in the moment.

Marley: You can also think about trying to corral some of the toys and materials in bins or some other way to make sure that not all of the materials are out all of the time.

Amelia: Right, and that can be helpful, too, because as children explore and interact with their environment, they know where to put things back and also where to get things. That can be a really helpful guidance for children, as well.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. And these are all great tips for home visitors to help families with at home, as well. So, where in the home can we help create calming spaces in that home environment, as well?

Amelia: Right, so it's important to think about a space that a child knows that they can consistently go for quiet activities in the home, maybe even a specific part of the couch, a favorite toy. It doesn't have to be a whole new room, right? It could just be a corner of the house or a spot on the couch, a cushy chair, maybe even sitting on a footstool — whatever works best for that child, just a space that they know they can return to again and again, that is quiet, safe, and calming for them.

OK. We've been talking about creating environments that are engaging but not overwhelming, and I think it's important to reiterate here that "engaging and not overwhelming" doesn't mean that every child is always sitting quietly, that we can't have this fun, full-body play where children are really active both physically and verbally engaged with what we're doing. So, what are some of the things we need to think about when we're creating spaces for big, active play?

Marley: Yeah, I really love that you brought this up. So, often, we're thinking about creating safe environments. It's often about limiting children's exploration, [chuckles] you know, so that everybody's safe, and that's not what we're talking about, really. It's very important that children have these appropriate challenges, these appropriate physical challenges.

Amelia: Where they can move their body, explore, thinking about big open spaces for children as they're learning coordination, strengthening their developing muscles, taking those calculated, safe risks, right?

Marley: Yeah, and this is where we as adults play a really important part in setting up a responsive learning environment, because if we are not helping support these safe, appropriate risks, then sometimes children might find these challenges on their own in a less safe way.

Amelia: Right, and we want to have opportunities for being able to explore in these sort of big ways, right? Because creating spaces, these learning environments, are an important way that programs can use to support children's perceptual, motor, and physical development as

outlined in this domain of the ELOF. And this brings to mind – you know, this full-body play really brings to mind outdoors, right?

Marley: Mm-hmm. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, the outdoors can be such a wonderful place for children to explore and to work on many of these skills through play.

Amelia: OK. And so, a lot of times, also, when we're thinking about full-body play, I have a toddler or maybe an older preschooler, you know, in mind.

Marley: Running around like crazy.

Amelia: Right, right, what about infants or really young toddlers that are just sort of starting to, you know, move their bodies?

Marley: Yeah, right. So, start by focusing on adding in diverse textures that they can explore, things like leaves and pebbles or different-size plastic balls; so anything with diverse shapes, textures, colors, things like that.

Amelia: And we all know that infants and toddlers love, love, love to dump out and fill up containers over and over and over. I have seen children do this for many minutes ...

Marley: [Laughs]

Amelia: ... maybe even approaching hours of filling up and dumping out and filling up and dumping out. There's something really mesmerizing and engaging and really satisfying for infants and toddlers because it's something that they're able to do on their own. They can make something happen in the world.

Marley: Another tip that I love is creating a music wall outside.

Amelia: Oh, yeah, so fun.

Marley: So, of course, we need to think about what materials are safe and making sure that they're at a height that infants and toddlers can reach; but you can use found or household objects, recyclables, and think of things that might make an interesting noise when you bang on them or hit them, and you can secure them to a fence or wall within easy reach.

Amelia: Right, and so, for infants and toddlers, when we're thinking about banging or hitting on them, we're thinking about them using their hands, right, or their bodies to engage with them.

Marley: Yeah, so there's a lot of really excellent fine-motor skills going on and all sorts of exploration through play here.

Amelia: So, supporting outdoor play, this can be kind of challenging, right, Marley? Can you talk a little bit more about some struggles that teachers or educators might have when they're supporting outdoor play?

Marley: Many teachers struggle in supporting outdoor play, and one of the key reasons here is that they're often caught up in supervision and rules, so they're of course trying to make sure everyone's safe.

Amelia: Right, those outdoor environments feel a little bit like they're harder to control, right, you know? We're out in the elements.

Marley: Right, exactly. And what ends up happening is that this can allow teachers to exhibit behaviors that end up limiting children's play and exploration.

Amelia: So, here's a great opportunity, right? We can think about how to provide extra support for grantees, try and figure out what safety concerns grantees might have, have a conversation. What is it they're worried about outside or even inside? What do they find that limits children's free play and exploration? And once they've assessed their environment, rearrange their — the environment as needed to keep everyone safely exploring and having fun. So, if we're thinking about rearranging the environment, what kind of things would we be doing there?

Marley: One of the things that I recommend that grantees do is to first observe — and both other educators, other teachers, other adults, but also their own behavior when the children are around and playing in that space, and to notice when and where they find themselves saying "no" a lot.

Amelia: And I think what you just said is one of our number-one best tools that we have, doing a little self-observation ...

Marley: Yeah.

Amelia: ...regardless of who we are, regardless of what our job is, how we're going through our life, that taking a moment to do some self-observation and thinking about it; you know, it's free, it's accessible, and so useful.

Marley: Absolutely, and so I love this kind of self-audit of when you're saying "no" a lot — not because you're never allowed to say "no" to children.

Amelia: Right, that's important. "No" is an important tool, too.

Marley: But that when you're saying "no," are you always saying "no" around the same toy or in the same part of a play space? Because chances are you've just helped identify for yourself where there are problem spots that show you opportunities to maybe shift the materials around or the activities slightly, just a little bit, that helps everyone to stay safe and then helps you [chuckles] not have to say "no" all the time and keeps kids exploring and having fun.

Amelia: OK so, we've been talking about outdoor play, which is great, but what if a family or a program doesn't have easy access to a safe place to play outside? Programs often think about the outdoors as the main place for gross-motor learning, and certainly that is one of the first places that comes to my mind, too, but children use their gross-motor skills anywhere, right? Indoors, too.

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. So, this is a really great place that you just highlighted for home visitors to work with parents. So, home visitors can help caregivers think about setting up appropriate and fun and safe physical challenges at home. So, again, if we're not, as adults, helping support these safe physical challenges, children are often gonna find some of those physical challenges all on their own. [chuckles]

Amelia: Right, so it's great to think about ways that we can help create these and support children in this exploration. So, for example, maybe we can line up the dining-room chairs all in a row, and then children can crawl through or around them, right?

Marley: Yeah, absolutely. Another great idea that can be used in the classroom, center, or home environment, as well, could be to cut out circles of paper and then tape them to the floor and then have kids dance in place to music.

Amelia: Right, there's all sorts of things that we can do for our indoor spaces to create these opportunities for safe and challenging play.

Marley: So, research shows that diversity in the physical environment supports play and exploration. So, thinking about adding in diversity, so that can be in heights or textures or things like that — so, for example, cushions to climb on, low spaces to crawl under.

Amelia: Right.

Marley: You can help grantees look for ways to encourage a diversity of movements and exploration from the children in their programs.

Amelia: And another important thing to think about is to think about adaptations that programs can make for children or family members with disabilities so that they can join in the fun, too. So, for example, you can add railings to a set of stairs to allow a child with motor challenges to climb with some added stability.

Marley: Yeah, that is also important.

Amelia: Right. And, you know, we're talking about here, these are examples of creating an environment of "yes." And, Marley, you talk about this a lot. What do we mean by creating an environment of "yes"?

Marley: Yeah, I mean, I know we talked earlier about doing sort of a self-audit of when you say "no" a lot.

Amelia: Right.

Marley: And that is a helpful opportunity for us to see when we can make subtle changes in the environment that might be problem spots, either for safety or for some other reasons and our goal here is to flip it to a space where it's an environment of "yes." And that just means that anything that a child can reach is safe and appropriate for them to play with.

Amelia: Right, and this allows that child to foster a sense of their autonomy of ability to do things for themselves as much as possible, which is such a powerful experience, and it also helps children engage and explore the environment.

We covered so much today. We talked about creating responsive learning environments and the many ways that this supports young children's learning. In your work supporting programs, help grantees to create environments of "yes," so that means that they have engaging, open-ended materials and use of space that encourages each child's ability to do things for themselves as much as possible.

Marley: Right, if it's safe, there's no wrong way to play with something. Supporting appropriate and safe physical challenges at home or in the classroom can be a wonderful way to reduce behaviors that are challenging for adults.

Amelia: You can also help program staff in making regular observations both of their learning spaces and also how the children and families in their programs interact with the learning environment over time. In a way, adults really have to be like scientists, so you continually observe the children in your care, and this is something you can help grantees in making this really a regular part of their practice.

Marley: It goes a little bit back to what we were talking about, which is using that self-observation tool and observing yourself, as well as what you're doing on an everyday basis.

We hope you enjoyed this podcast on responsive and engaging learning environments. For more information, visit ECLKC and search for "learning environments."

Female announcer: Thank you, for joining Head Start TALKs. For more information on what you heard today, visit the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, or ECLKC, at eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov.