Child Development in the Third Year of Life: How Toddlers Think and Feel

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Announcer: Welcome to "Head Start Talks," where big ideas support your everyday experiences.

Marley Jarvis: 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 the implications and practical applications of this research. My name is Marley Jarvis, and I'm joined by my colleague Beth Zack for this conversation. Beth and I are 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.

Today we're finishing up a three-part series in which we discuss how children think and feel during the first three years of life. We're approaching these conversations from the child's perspective. This series is created with the conviction that understanding how children experience the world, what they're going through can help us in our work with them. When we see the world the way they see it. When we empathize with their experience, we are in a much better position to understand how they learn and how we can help them learn. In the previous episode our conversation focused on how children think and feel during the second year of life. We're continuing with the third and final episode in this series now, focusing on that third year of life. Beth will kick us off here to begin our conversation.

Beth Zack: We've said this each episode and it's true again, there is so much that happens during this third year. Lots of new stuff from toilet training to children speaking in short sentences. This really is a time of amazing growth and development. Today we're going to be focusing on the approaches to learning and the cognition domains. That's really because self-regulation skills, they are at the heart of a 2-year old's behavior. And they're also developing new and exciting cognitive skills during this year. And of course, that learning is connected across those ELOF domains.

Marley: OK, to get us going here. I want you to think about a 2-year-old. And what is the first word or phrase that comes to mind? But remember in this series we are encouraging you to see and hopefully really feel what it's like to view the world from the child's perspective. Ask yourself, what is it like to experience the world the way toddlers do? It's pretty different perhaps than how we do.

Think back to that word or phrase that you wrote down. Does it have a negative or problem focused, or a more positive connotation? And if it's negative, can you think of how to rephrase that? Can you maybe come up with a word that would show that same concept as a strength? Often the terrible twos, that's a phrase that some adults may use to describe this time period. Let's try to shift that a little bit here.

Beth: Think about how a toddler might describe themselves. They're going to say, "I'm not – I'm not terrible." Maybe "I'm curious", "I'm persistent", "I'm energetic" or something along those

lines. That doesn't mean we can't find their behavior challenging at times, because we can, and we will. But we can shift our mindset and our focus from negative to positive. From a challenge to seeing the strengths in all these new behaviors and skills and things they're showing us.

Marley: Yeah, and a major goal here is so that it enables us to best support them. When we're taking the child's point of view and we're taking that time to empathize with our experience and what that might actually be like, and we as the adult we're in a much better place to support them through whatever it is that they're working on, and all of their wonderful things they're working on this year.

Beth: Yes absolutely. Before we jump into the research that we want to share with you today, I want to revisit our principles of development that we talked about in our first two episodes. And they were one I learned from other people. Two I learned through experience. Three I need help regulating my emotions. And four I benefit from doing things for myself. And these all continue to be true.

They're going to start to look a bit different in practice because children are different, right? They're continuing to learn and grow. And we're going to cover research that touches on each of these. And then we'll revisit them to see how they've changed.

Marley: OK relationships, definitely still key. But they are starting to look a little bit different. Children are working on becoming social partners with their primary care givers.

Beth: They need our help with this. But this is also coming at a time when they want more autonomy. Dr. Barry Brazelton, he's a renowned American pediatrician and researcher, he called the toddler years a declaration of independence. True, continues to be true with my now 5-year-old. But especially during this third year.

We're really seeing toddlers. They're working on becoming their own person. They're going from mostly going along with the adults plans. And then suddenly they start having these opinions. Like no, this way. Or "me do it." They might show these through actions, rather than words if they don't have those words to communicate.

Marley: We are hearing, or seeing, no. But really the child is telling us when you let me do things by myself, I develop a sense of self-control. And also, confidence in my abilities as they're growing. And research actually talks about this, shows a positive relationship between parents who support their child's autonomy, so their ability to do things by themselves, to the best of their ability. And something called executive function skills later on in their pre-school years. Executive function skills. This includes things like self-control. And we're going to talk more about executive function skills in a bit, so that's all I'll say now.

Beth: But still they have this new need for autonomy. From picking out their own clothes, to not being ready to come inside from playing. This can actually be pretty hard for us adults too. For the most part this little person just went along with our plans until now.

Marley: They have this new strategy for learning, really is what this is supporting during this third year. I assert my independence. As challenging as that might feel to us, remember this is part of their learning process.

Beth: Yes, but also from the child's perspective I'm only 2 and I still need you, the adult even though I may exclaim that I don't or push you away. I can't help but share one more quote here. This one is from Claire Learner who is a licensed clinical social worker and author of many wonderful parenting publications and resources. And she sums up toddlers nicely by calling them a bundle of contradictions.

Marley: I really like that. One minute they're sweetly asking for a cheese stick. And then the next minute they're rolling on the floor crying because you gave them the cheese stick. We, as adults were sitting here "What just happened?”

Beth: Right and this is one reason many adults often call this year the terrible twos. From tantrums to rapid mood changes. Those out-of-control feelings we see, impulsive behavior. The twos really have them all.

Marley: Yeah, they do. It's a bit of a roller coaster. But when we take a developmental perspective and look at the research, we see that there's reasons for these behaviors. Like to say that their behavior has meaning. If we're being honest as adults, we feel a lot of different feelings every day too. But we have more tools for working through them.

Beth: Right, and no one calls us terrible all the time. Really toddlers they're not terrible at all. They just don't have the skills to act or reason like we can. And we shouldn't expect them to. They don't have the same life experience. They lack the self-control, language skills and brain maturation. We're going to touch on each of those three things here.

Marley: We're going to start with brain development. One because it's cool. Everybody always likes talking about brain development. But also, what's driving toddler behavior and emotions, what we're talking about here. Part of the brain, behind your forehead. This is the pre-frontal cortex. And it plays a really critical role in all of this. Especially in self-regulation. As you can imagine fundamental for school, also just life. Being able to regulate oneself is a big deal. And I think we mentioned this earlier, so it's part of the suite of skills that we call executive functioning.

Other things in that suite of skills, executive functioning includes the ability to problem solve and to think flexibly to be able to narrow in your focus on a single task, just to pay attention and to sustain focus. Also, to remember rules and procedures, things that if I tell you here's what we're going to do, can you remember that and focus long enough to carry that out. As well as the ability to control impulses. A ton of really key stuff, not just for school readiness, but of course for life there. This is all part of the executive functioning.

Beth: Right. There's a reason a 2-year-old is not in kindergarten, and that's because they don't have the neural networks in place to self-regulate and to exhibit all of these skills that you need for school yet. They can't, and we shouldn't expect them to control their impulses on their own. They're still learning. The connections and the networks that form in the part of the brain, this is developed over the course of their entire childhood. It really takes years to build those connections and the response networks that they need for self-control.

Marley: Yeah, and you all play a really big role in this. Those connections aren't forming on their own. They're forming in the context of responsive caring relationships. And of course, we do

see individual differences and how children are able to manage their emotions and their behavior and to some of that may be from genes, some of that from age. And also, experiences. Of course, there are some of these individual differences as well.

Beth: I'd love to share a recent study that researchers did where they tested whether 2- and 3-year olds could wait, so self-control to get a snack or a gift reward.

Marley: You may be familiar with Walter Mischel's classic marshmallow test. Where they measured whether 4-to-6-year olds could delay gratification really, to get two marshmallows instead of just one. And one of the things that they found was that children who used better strategy to distract themselves from the marshmallow, showed more self-control.

Beth: What I really want to focus on though is one with the age we're focused on today. That third year of life. This study was with 2- and 3-year olds. This is a similar type of study only they had either a box of raisins that they were trying to wait for, this is the snack delay or a wrapped present. That was the gift delay. The researcher told the child that they had another task they needed to go do and they asked the child to not touch the raisins or that wrapped present, until they were finished. And that delayed that they were waiting, it was one minute.

Marley: OK were they able to wait? That's the question.

Beth: Well the 3-year olds were better at waiting than the 2-year olds. And then like the older children in the marshmallow test, they actually found that children who used certain strategies they were better at self-control. Waiting to get that snack or get that gift. The children who looked away from, if I don't see it maybe I'll forget about it from the raisins or the gift. Or actually held one hand and the other, almost holding themselves back. They were more successful. And those children who were successful, they actually showed those two behaviors, the looking away and the holding the hands within the first 10 seconds on average of that delay starting of that one-minute delay.

Marley: That's pretty interesting.

Beth: Yeah.

Marley: Also, distractions can be helpful for 2-year olds to regulate their emotions too. I think that's interesting.

Beth: Then there's other study I wanted to share. And they use that same type of snack and gift delay task. Only they did things a little bit different. They were interested in the type of distraction activity that children chose and whether it matched their temperament.

Marley: That's pretty cool.

Beth: They tried that delay task once, so the waiting game. And then they watched a researcher play with either an active toy or a calm toy like stacking cups as a distraction during a similar waiting task. They're watching the researcher choose this active toy or this calm toy. And the researcher actually told the toddler, she said, "I don't like to wait. But I feel OK when I'm playing with this toy." Either that active toy or the calm toy. And then the children played the waiting game again, with a different set of toys with these distractions available.

Marley: And what did they find?

Beth: Well, they found that first of all the more that a child used the distraction toy, the less negative emotions they showed. That actually helped keep them calm during something that could be a frustrating situation. Having to wait for a gift or a snack. And then children also play with that distraction toy more after having watched the researcher play with one of them. And then one of the really cool things they found was that the toy that they chose matched their activity level. And activity level is a key dimension of temperament.

They had parents report on this before the kids played this game. If parents reported the child's activity level as more calm, then they were more likely to choose the calm toy. And if parents reported the child as more activity, they tended to play with the active toy. And they chose that even if they had seen the researcher choose a toy that didn't match their activity level. If they had watched the researcher play with the wheelbarrow, but they reported as calm they would have chose the stacking cups more likely.

Marley: That's pretty cool. There's actually a lot in that study.

Beth: Yes.

Marley : We have children learning from observation, observing that researcher. And there's also something really cool there; they're learning to regulate their emotions in a way that matches the child's temperament. That's really neat.

Beth: I just love that. We can actually put these findings into practice. When a child is in some sort of a frustrating or slightly distressing situation, you could try giving them choices between different types of materials or activities, such as something that's more active versus calm. Let them choose how to regulate their behaviors and their emotions. You never know, it just might be successful. I wish this is something I have thought of when my daughter was younger. It's like so obvious, I'm sure I never gave her a different option between things. But like never really made that distinction between giving her something that was more active versus more calm.

I just think it's like a great way to think about really matching the types of activities that they like, and their temperament. We've been talking about children regulation their behavior and their emotions. But you've probably seen this or experienced it. But sometimes they just can't do it. Even with distractions, even with our support.

Marley: Yeah right. Let's make sure we're looking at this from the child's perspective. I get overwhelmed by my emotions. And I'm not having a tantrum because of anything you, the adult did. I just need to release these emotions. But remember I don't have the language skills to say what's bothering me. Sometimes I have a tantrum.

Beth: Right. And we actually have research that shows that children's language skills can contribute to tantrums. A group of researchers at Northwestern University looked at language skills and temper tantrums in 2000 toddlers. And they found that late talkers, which they defined as children who were saying fewer than 50 words or weren't combining words into short phrases by age 2, that those late talkers had nearly double the number of tantrums as their peers who talked earlier.

Marley: Yeah, that's a huge difference.

Beth: It is. And not only that, for those late talkers, their tantrums tended to be more severe, so things like holding their breath, hitting or kicking.

Marley: Yeah. What this means is if you're seeing a combination of language delays and frequent tantrums this maybe is a good time to get some help. Either you, or the families you work with can connect with some additional support through pediatrician, early intervention if that's available to you. Just in case there's delays beyond the typical development there.

Beth: Right, absolutely.

Marley: OK. Working on self-regulation skills it's very important task is going on during that third year. But there's also a lot more happening developmentally. 2-year old's curiosity and experimentation. These things don't always lead to behavior we find challenging. It also leads to exciting changes.

Beth: We're seeing a lot going on in our cognitive development during this third year. This is what we're talking about next.

Marley: Yeah, I'd like to bring back to the strategies for learning that we introduced in our last episode. And that was I experiment, and I play. There is so much learning that happens through play. And if I push this ice down this ramp, it will roll. But only if it's in the shape of a ball. They are testing out ideas through play, practicing real world events and figuring out how things work. And the other really cool thing about play is that it gives children autonomy. When we just let them play. And they desperately crave that at this age. And they can make decisions about what and how to play.

Beth: Yeah, they get to be charge and play, which is sometimes unique in their day. OK there's a lot going on in the development of a 2-year-old. But next, I'd like to focus in on something called symbolic thinking or symbolic understanding. And it's connection to everything from play to children's thinking skills. Symbols, this might seem a little random, but bear with me.

Understanding and using symbols. This is just a universal part of development and participating in your culture, whatever that might be. We use symbols all the time when you think about it. Writing our alphabet system. Models that we may have to represent something else. Music, like musical notation and stuff. Signs, symbolic gestures like thumbs up. These are really commonplace examples but importantly we're not born with an understanding of symbols.

As an adult we take this for granted that there's this connection between the symbol like our thumbs up and the referent, or sort of what it's referring to or what the object or the idea that it represents. This begs the question if I'm born with it, when do young children start to use symbols as a source of information or for reasoning?

Marley: Great I'd love to share some experiments where they looked at, they tested children understanding of symbolic relationships. This first one was a seminal study of a time and it really contributed to our understanding of early symbolic thinking. The researchers were curious whether 2 and a half, and 3-and-a-half-year olds whether they could understand that something is a real thing in and of itself. But also represent something else. For example, map is real, but it also represents where landmarks are in the real world.

The researcher showed that children a regular sized stuffed dog and then a miniature version of that same dog. And then they also had a big room, so imagine like the one you're in now and then they made a matching miniature version of that same room. And experimenter showed the child features of both rooms and how they were the same. And then next the child watched the researcher hide that little dog in the miniature room for example under the pillow on a couch. And then they brought the child to the corresponding big room. And the child's task was simply to find the toy. The researcher even told the child that was hidden in the exact same space.

Beth: I love these studies, they're so creative. Beth, share with us, what did they find?

Marley: OK this was easy for those 3-and-a-half-year olds. But the 2-and-a-half-year olds, they really struggled with this. They were just randomly searching around the big room as if they had, did not represent anything. There's this remarkable shift in children's symbolic understanding between 2 and a half and 3 years of age. Those older children seem to understand that there was a relationship between the symbol, that miniature room. And as referent, which was the big room. But the 2-and-a-half-year-old had no clue that one room represented the other, even with those prompts and the researcher pointing out how they were exactly the same.

Beth: That's pretty interesting. I mean 2 and a half to 3 is not that big of a difference in age. But it sure made a big difference in that study. And the reasoning there is this development of symbolic understanding. At 3 years of age, most children have this sort of symbolic understanding. Again, this is something like using a map to understand the location of animals at the zoo in relation to your own location. If I walked through the main entrance, the lions which I'm really after, they're going to be straight ahead, great. Why is this so difficult for the 2-and-a-half-year olds, when it seems so obvious to even just a 3 and of course us as adults.

Marley: The researchers wondered the same thing. They did a second experiment. And I love this one because it gets that creativity you're talking about. They created a shrinking machine.

Beth: That's great. OK.

Marley: The researcher, they had children play that same hide and find game as before. Only this time the researcher told some of the children that they had a shrinking machine that could make the room and the toys both smaller and bigger. They had children turn that machine on, and then they left the room. And they heard machine sounds like, boop, beep, ba, da, boop, boop. And then they came back and only to find either the smaller toy and that same spot or even the smaller room. And guess what? When children thought that that big room was the same as the miniature model, they did much better at finding the toy.

Beth: Really what's happening in this is they're doing the shrinking machine, which is shrinking the room and the toys. Effectively the researchers are just taking away the need for symbolic understanding.

Marley: Yeah, from the child's perspective it's now the same room and toy. It's not representing something else. It's just the same thing. It's only shrunk or made bigger. They only had to remember where it was hidden, which makes it a simple memory task. And when it was a

simple memory task, the 2-and-a-half-year-olds succeeded. But when it was that symbolic game, that's where the 2-and-a-half-year-olds had trouble transferring their learning between a symbol and it's referent. And the researchers propose that this might be due to limited cognitive flexibility of the age.

There's a lot happening between 2 and a half and 3. At 2 and a half they had difficulty mentally representing a single object in two different ways. In this experiment that means representing it as that miniature model and the object or the room itself. I mean while being an entertaining and silly seeming study, there's a big take away here going back to, practice perhaps in a classroom or in the family home. Is that we can't assume that children under the age of 3 are going to understand the connection between a symbol and an object or an action or an idea or whatever we're using to represent it.

Beth: Exactly. From other research we also know that young children have trouble mapping from themselves to a doll, or vice versa. Even though these connections might seem super obvious to us as adults. We know that symbolic thinking becomes more sophisticated with both age and experience.

Marley: One way that we can give children practice with symbolic thinking is through pretend play. And in fact, you might have even heard pretend play referred to as symbolic play.

Beth: Tell us more about those two are connected.

Marley: During pretend play, I mean think about what children are doing when you see them play. They're using objects or actions or ideas to stand in for something else. They're getting practice using symbols. They might use stick for a hair comb or something like that. this is showing symbolic thinking. They're using symbols. And pretend play like this, it's emerging in children who are typically developing, by shortly after their second birthday.

Beth: And they're also practicing social and emotional skills. As they test out routines and roles from everyday life. Things like brushing teeth and making drinks.

Marley: There are actions to language development, social and emotional development, cognition, so on.

Beth: Self-regulation skills.

Marley: Yeah, OK tell us more about that Beth.

Beth: There's interesting research that shows an early connection between pretend play in young children and the self-regulation skills that we talked about earlier. One researcher found that children who were more successful on a pretending task, they were better able to wait for a sticker. Similar to that snack or that gift delay that we talked about earlier. Visibility to show inhibitory control. To stop themselves from acting. This increased with age, from 1 and a half to 2 and a half years. In other words, children who play more pretend, tend to show better self-control.

Marley: So cool. And if we're thinking about how we might support that as adults, as educators, a great way is just to have lots of open-ended materials. Things that they can play with adult have, one right way to use them. Really letting children use their imaginations.

Beth: Yes absolutely. Open-ended materials are also great for the strategies we talked about, so far. Supporting children's autonomy, their experimentation and their play during the examples we've shared we've also talked about another strategy for learning that was also big during the first and second years of life. And that is I watch. At age 2, children they copy others, especially adults and other children. And learning by watching and imitating actually continues to be important throughout this year and even throughout pre-school.

By age 3 children are going from simply just copying actions. To actually learning rules and strategies and things that are going to help them get ready for school. And they do this by watching and then copying others. I'd sort of would like to wrap up that research section and move on to some effective practices. But first I want to revisit those principles that we talked about at the beginning because I promised that we would see how they've changed across this year.

The first one, I'm fascinated by people. Really, it's not just that they're fascinated by people. But they're really working toward becoming social partners with them. And of course, readily learning from others that is still true. The second one, I learned through experience. We talked about how they're developing thinking skills through symbolic thinking skills through pretend play. And it really takes experience to get better at regulating emotions and behaviors.

And then that piece connects back to both that first principle so learning from others and then also our third principle which was I need help navigating change and regulating my emotions. This is such a big part of being 2. As we've talked about. I think the thing here I want to mention is that as a 2-year-old, so from my perspective I need you, the adult, to be a calm model for me. Show me how I can control my behavior and emotions.

And then finally, number four is I benefit from doing things for myself when I can. And I'd like to update this one too. I want to do things for myself, but I still need you to set limits and be there to scaffold my behavior.

Marley: So important. We've visited and revised these principles, which is great. And we've also talked about strategies for learning. I assert my independence. I experiment, I play, and I watch.

Beth: Yeah, now let's talk about those effective practices, to support 2-year olds as they use these strategies to learn about people and the world. And one of those number one practices that can be especially helpful during what can be a challenging year for us adults is to really start with ourselves and our own mindsets.

Bringing us back to the beginning, we talked about shifting from negative to positive. Rather than the terrible twos, think of all the learning and the strengths that toddlers are showing during this year. And put yourself in that 2-year old's shoes, especially when they're having a hard time. And think about how it feels when an adult remains calm and acknowledges your feelings. And it's like this reset for your brain when you think of it from the child's perspective.

Marley: Yeah, thanks for bringing that up. I mean that's so important. And I feel like something that adults tend to do, sort of erroneously make a mistake here is that we think that we have to agree with how the toddler is acting or how they're feeling in order to take their perspective. Which is not true at all. We can take their perspective and provide that empathy without

reinforcing a negative behavior. We can still have empathy while setting limits. And that's tough. Of course, it takes practice, but it's a big part of our role as an adult here.

Beth: Yes, and so important. One piece of doing that is really setting realistic developmentally appropriate expectations for 2-year olds behavior. And really meeting children where they are. It's often the case that a child turns 2 and we're like oh, they're no longer our baby. And we start treating them a lot older than what they are. Sometimes we expect more of their behavior and it can be too much more.

Marley: Yeah, I'm really glad you brought this up. Here is a report actually from Zero to Three. It conducted a national survey of parents and in the survey they were asking about when these parents expected their child or children to reach certain milestones. And among other things, they found that the majority of parents thought their child could exhibit self-control. One to two years before they're actually developmentally able.

Beth: Wow, that just always blows my mind a little bit. But this is so important. It's important for our education staff, for us and to share with families too.

Marley: Yeah absolutely. I mean and the goal here is that we have realistic expectations and we're holding all children to those same standards of behavior for their developmental level. And this is a big part of creating equitable learning spaces.

Beth: Yes, so important. What else can we do?

Marley: Yeah, we can acknowledge toddlers big feelings and let them feel them. And hope families do the same. It's okay for them to feel those big feelings.

Beth: Right, and the middle of a tantrum is not the time to try to reason with them or negotiate. They are being flooded by emotions during a tantrum. They're not in a place to reason themselves or to even learn when they're overcome with emotions.

Marley: Right, exactly. What you can do is be calm, be present, be responsive, your tone of voice and your body language and just remember young children aren't developmentally ready to exhibit self-control. They need us, the adults to do that and to help support them in that.

Beth: Right. And sometimes that means just being nearby as a gentle reminder for child not to do something. Many of you might have experienced the child who waits for you to turn your back and then they touch something they're not supposed to. But when you're close by just your presence can be reminder enough for them not to do it.

Marley: Yeah, yeah. You have to find what works for each individual child in your care. For some it might be providing a hug or maybe taking deep breaths together. Showing them how to do that. For others, maybe it's best to hang back and give them some space to let it out while you're holding some boundaries, making sure that they are physically safe.

Beth: Right, and this really ties into the next piece we've been talking about, self-regulation. Our role as adults is to help young children move from dysregulated, to regulated. And we do this when we model for them how to respond, and we give them tools for regulating. And another thing we can do as adults is label our own emotions throughout the day. And share with families how to do this too. Say "I feel frustrated when you run away, when I'm trying to

brush your teeth. I'm going to take some deep breaths to help me feel calm. And then we'll try again."

Marley: Yeah, building you know, warm and responsive relationships. This is showing children that we are there for them even when they have these melt downs or they can't quite deal with their emotions yet. We're still there for them. That's a big part of this.

Beth: Right. You can set up a cozy corner in the learning environment or home for a space for them to go to regulate their emotions or their behaviors.

Marley: Yeah totally. Another thing, I mean children tend to do best when they know what to expect. You can create predictable schedules and routines. And that can also help.

Beth: Another thing we can do is give children that time to practice self-regulation skills during calm times too. Not just when they are flooded by emotions and they can't really learn right in that moment. Let them do it during calm times. For example, you can play games where children need to listen and follow instructions or stop a behavior. Things like red light, green light or even for this age a slowed down version of head shoulders, knees and toes.

Marley: Yep, right. That's a great one. And you can adapt games like this for children with a disability or suspected delay. For red light, green light you might assign a stationary movement for example tapping their fingers on the table. You say green, they can tap like that. Or if you're thinking about that slowed down version of head shoulders, knees and toes. Maybe they point to laminated images of the body parts as you sing.

Beth: Being present. Giving them tools to practice regulating emotions and their behaviors. This is all part of being responsive caregivers.

Marley: Speaking of responsive caregiving one aspect that's particularly important for children's developing executive function skills, is nurturing children's initiatives and their ideas. This is something that researchers call autonomy support.

Beth: Yes, and so autonomy support it can look like offering choices and really encouraging children's interests, following their lead. Working to understand children's perspectives and feelings. And also explain why you're asking for a behavior. Rather than just be quiet, say why it's important to be quiet during that time. It's also making physical modifications to a space. Things that allow children to do or try things, more independently. Such as selecting their shoes to try to put on themselves or having that step stool available to reach the sink.

Marley: Yeah and remember for children with disabilities or suspected delays you need to think about how you can make modifications or maybe additional supports. All children really deserve this opportunity to explore their ideas and do things they're interested in. Really as independently as they can. And they have interest in doing.

If a child is not able to access a toy that they're interested in or a space for example that's really your cue that you need to change something about it. This might mean physical modifications to that space or to the toy whatever that might be, or maybe some other emotional or instructional supports depending on what that might be. Again, for home visitors, your job then is also to work with families to help them identify what their child's interests are. And coach

them in ways to support. But not take over. Not dominate whatever that interest or that activity that their child might be doing.

Beth: We talked about one day to support autonomy is providing choices. And I'd love to share some research where they found that 2-year olds show what they call a recency bias. That's picking the last thing that they hear and the option that they select.

They call this paper, cake or broccoli. And in the game the researcher asks children a series of questions about Rory the bear. Does Rory like apples or bananas? And then the child chose one of those and they went through a lot of these questions. And then they asked them those same questions again only their responses were flipped. Rather than "Does Rory like to eat apples or bananas?" "Does Rory like to eat bananas or apples?" And what they found was that children gave a verbal response about 70% of the time. And when they did give a verbal response, so when they said either apples or bananas for example, they chose that second option they heard 85% of the time.

Marley: Yeah, that's pretty high. Of course, this is in the lab, so what about everyday interactions Beth?

Beth: Yes, well I'm glad you asked. Because they did a second study where they looked at conversations between parents and their children at home. To do this more naturalistic setting. And they marked down when parents asked those type of X or Y questions. And what they found that children under 3 showed that recency bias still. They chose the last item that the parent said. But at age 3 and 4, children no longer showed this bias. They were just as likely to choose the first option as the second.

Marley: Let's talk about translating this to practice here.

Beth: Yes. When giving choices, start by giving two that you're comfortable with. But just two. Because then it's not overwhelming to the child. You're still giving the child that sense of control but staying within your boundary. And this is something you can have families try too. And then from that research before age 3, you could give the strategy we just talked about a try. Offer your preferred option second. You never know the toddler just might choose broccoli over cake.

Marley: Any other language tips for us Beth?

Beth: One of the things that I catch myself doing a lot is I add OK to the end of a sentence. It's time to get ready for a nap, OK? It's time to sit and eat, OK? And when we add OK, it gives them a chance to be like "no." Like no it's not OK. I don't want to do that. It's like we're asking them for approval.

Return to that first strategy and offer choices. Say it's nap time, would you like to turn off the light yourself or would you like for me to do it? Moving away from adding OK like we're actually giving them more of a choice here. And then also avoid using simple don't statements. Like "Don't bang on the door." Don't statements tell children what not to do, not what to do. What the behavior you'd like to see. You could rephrase to you can bang on something soft like a pillow so it doesn't make noise, that will wake your friends or your brother from a nap.

Marley: Another effective practice here, listen and give them space to try things on their own.

Beth: Yeah, when I say I can do it, and you let me try. Even if you think I can't or it's going to take longer, you're really helping me feel accomplished and confident in my abilities.

Marley: You can give hints, help them work through it. But don't take-over. You want to let them have that pride and accomplishment.

Beth: Yes, absolutely. There's also – what about when a child doesn't want to try to do something on their own? For all the times they want to try, they also – you might also hear "I can't do it."

Marley: Yeah, we can add the word "yet" when a child is saying something that they can't do.

Beth: I can't zip my coat.

Marley: I can't zip your coat yet. This is something that takes a lot of practice even for adults.

Beth: Yes. The third year continues to be all about language. Children need to hear language throughout the day to support their growing language skills. Remember they're moving from saying about 50 words to speaking in short sentences by the end of that third year.

Marley: And letting children play is a really great way to let them practice their language skills.

Beth: Yes, absolutely. The final effective practice I want to highlight today is really creating a caring community to build belonging. Our relationships with young children and how they feel in a learning space or how they feel in their home is really an important part of their social and emotional development. Building belonging is about creating spaces where children feel seen and understood. And safe in these types of spaces. That's when children can develop confidence and pride in their relationships and their abilities and their identities and importantly they learn it's okay to make mistakes. Mistakes are how we learn.

Marley: Yeah, that's so important.

Beth: That was our last effective practice we have time to share today. I just want to quickly recap all six. Remember your mindset matters.

Marley: Yep, during the third year we're supporting children's developing, self-regulation skills, providing autonomy support.

Beth: The language we use matters. We're continuing to grow their communication skills and their vocabulary skills.

Marley: Play, hugely important. Providing those open-ended materials and nurturing their imagination.

Beth: And creating that caring community by building belonging and helping families to do so in their homes as well. I think that serves as a great summary. With that we're pretty much out of time.

Marley: Thank you again for your time, and attention. And for all that you do on behalf of children.

[Music]

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.