

## Learning to Play and Playing to Learn in Home Environments

Joyce Escorcia: Hello, everyone. Thank you for joining us today for our home visiting webinar, "Learning to Play and Playing to Learn in Home Environments." Thank you, again, for joining us. While we're going through our first slides, going to remind you that we gave you a little teaser and asked you to bring some Play-Doh with you. If you need a second to go and grab that or if you have that at your desk, know that we're going to play a little together in just a few minutes.

We want to point out that Participant's Guide. Again, download it if you want. It's got some extra information and some questions and some places that you can jot down ideas as we're going through. You can also go back to it afterwards if you want to dig a little deeper into our topic. I wanted to point that out.

As a brief reminder, we have, this year, started an integrated approach across our different webinar series – the home visiting webinar series, the Practice-Based Coaching, the Education Managers, and Teacher Time. What we're trying to do is connect across topics and be able to give opportunities for learning and collaboration across those roles in your program, and we're going to keep that going today. Our webinars across this year have been focused in on the Head Start Early Learning Outcome Framework, or the ELOF, Approaches to Learning domain. This is webinar three of four. If you've missed one of the webinars, no worry, you can catch them On Demand or on the ECLKC. They'll migrate there eventually, as well. Again, if you need to – have more questions or want to go deeper, grab that resource guide, and those are also available with the On Demand.

I am Joyce Escorcia. I am so glad to be here with you guys, and I am even happier to have a familiar face to many of you. If you've seen "Baby Talks" or "Front Porch" series, we have Dawson Nichols with us. Dawson, you want to greet our home visiting community?

Dawson Nichols: I do. Hello to everybody. I'm here at the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington, and we are a partner organization. I have done, as Joyce said, other webinars, but I am so happy to be here for this one, because it gives me an opportunity to talk to you home visitors directly and, first and foremost, just say thank you for the work that you do. It is so important and so appreciated, so, yay, home visitors. Thanks.

Joyce: Thank you. Thank you, Dawson. Again, we're so happy to have this time to have this conversation with you about our topic. What we're looking forward to today is to talk with Dawson about how play can support the child's natural desire to learn. We're going to dig deeper into that with Dawson today, and we're hoping to share some ideas and strategies that you can use to support families as they're looking for ways to support children with their own curiosity and initiative. That's what we're honing in on today.

With all that being said, we've got some of the logistics out of the way, and we're going to invite you to pull your Play-Doh out if you have it. If you don't have Play-Doh today, that is completely OK, you can follow along. We've included an easy recipe in your Viewer's Guide for today that you can take and make a batch with kiddos in your household. You could also take that and share it with parents and families or even, say, use it for a group socialization. However you

want to interact with us today would be great and wonderful, and with that being said, Dawson, I'm going to turn it over to you for some Play-Doh time.

Dawson: That's right. I am an expert in playing with Play-Doh. What we want to do is just take a minute and play with the Play-Doh that we have, and if you don't, heck, you can watch me play with it. It is a load of fun, and it is something that we need to reflect on with regard to play, and that's just that it takes time, and we don't need to hurry through it. A lot of times, the joy that we get out of simply playing with things and feeling textures and looking at shapes – there's so much learning that happens during this – we just want to take some time and play for a minute. As we do, let's look at the shapes and the textures that we get. I'm noticing with my Play-Doh here, that I can make really jaggedy shapes just by tearing it like this. Although sometimes it looks pokey, I feel like – I wonder if I can make something sharp with this, and it turns out I can't. It's not that kind of a substance. That's an interesting thing I'm learning about this substance. This kind of sensory play is so important, and children need to do it over and over. We don't want to hurry them through it, we want to enjoy it with them. There are lots of different things we can do with something as simple as Play-Doh, and again, it doesn't have to be fancy. We can put it down, and if you have a paper clip or something – I have a pencil nearby, so I can make little lines with the pencil in the Play-Doh, and I can stretch those lines. Oh, my gosh. Look at these interesting shapes and things. I can also just be quiet with it and enjoy the texture and the feel. I'm learning about tacky, and how is tacky different from sticky? When I take little tiny pieces and roll them up, they feel different from the larger pieces that I have that I can just squish, and when I do that, I can see the shape of my fingers. There is so much to be interested in here, and it takes time. It can be meditative. Maybe some of you have used fidget toys and things like this as a way of focusing your attention, and it works wonderfully that way. That is just a small experience of playing with some Play-Doh.

Joyce: Dawson, I will just say that I am a fellow fidgeter, so I am all about the Play-Doh. I probably will not put this down the whole time we're talking. I'm going to invite our community out there that – keep playing with your Play-Doh. Keep making shapes, because a lot of times, that's how – for me, it helps me to concentrate, if I have something in my hands. And no worries, we're going to get the Play-Doh back out in just a few minutes. But we do want to introduce our topic a little bit today. We are going further into Approaches to Learning, and just as each one of us approached our Play-Doh in a different way, and as Dawson was showing us different ways, it really is the how of learning. That's what Approaches to Learning is all about. It refers to the skills and the behaviors that children use to engage in learning, just like we use all kinds of different ways. Dawson, you modeled quite a few different ways for us to interact and learn about the Play-Doh – it was all right. Everything that we were doing, we were all right, right? And we were all learning together.

Dawson: I think that's so important to remind everybody, that, again, especially with open-ended materials like this – and we love open-ended materials – there's no right way to do it. There is just the exploration and the joy of the exploration.

Joyce: That's it. That's it, and we're going to dig into that a little bit today. It's about the joy of the journey, is the way I like to think about it.

Dawson: Yes.

Joyce: Today we are going to keep digging into that Approaches to Learning domain. It includes four subdomains, and that's Behavioral Self-Regulation and Cognitive Self-Regulation. We've already covered those two in our previous webinars, and today we're talking about Initiative and Curiosity, and then Creativity we'll hit with our next webinar of the year. Again, we're focusing in on that Initiative and Curiosity, so we're all going to give ourselves permission to play and just go there with each other today. And we know that, just as we – I mean, I'm still – some people say that I'm a little too curious at times, and children, they're just born with that natural drive of wondering why and being curious about things and people. Everything, everybody around them is interesting. My little girl, everybody she sees, she's just awed by them. I have to tell them, "She's just really curious right now." That's really what initiative and curiosity is. It's about how they are exploring and learning about everything and everyone around them, and that's what we're going to dig into today.

Dawson: Absolutely.

Joyce: Just a quick pulse check, going back to our Play-Doh, how many of you guys out there are fellow fidgeters? We're going to send out the pulse check and just ask if you say, "Yes, I am all about fidget toys or having something in my hand to help me concentrate," just that thumbs-up, and if you say, "No, that's not really my thing," then a thumbs-down. That is completely OK. Again, we're all right about this, but we're just curious to see how many of you guys are fellow fidgeters. Dawson, I see that the majority of the folks are right there with us playing with their Play-Doh as we speak.

Dawson: Yeah. Again, it's – Vive la difference. It's OK, whatever side you fall down on, but many people do find that having something to concentrate on physically helps them concentrate mentally on something else. Other people, they need to have their entire focus on one thing. Both styles of play work, of concentration work. Yeah, we're getting quite a few people who are fidgeters like us. Excellent.

Joyce: Yeah, welcome.

Dawson: Indeed, indeed.

Joyce: We have found our tribe here. We're going to –

Dawson: I'm going to end that pulse check.

Joyce: Yeah. Keep playing with the Play-Doh, or keep concentrating on what we're talking about, whatever works for you, and we're going to keep going here.

Dawson: Yes.

Joyce: I'm going to move my screen around just a second. Dawson, you were talking about – I think I went one too far there. In our session today, we're going to be focusing on that Initiative and Curiosity piece, which is that subdomain of Approaches to Learning. Dawson, can you talk to us about, how can a home visitor share with a parent about, what is Curiosity and Initiative? I'm sure maybe they're asking themselves, "OK, I get it, but what are some practical ways that I could explain this to parents and families that I support?"

Dawson: Yeah, I like to keep it simple. Rather than getting into too many details, I would say with initiative, we simply mean that a child is doing something on their own without prompting. This is true for us, too. If we want to do something on our own, we're showing initiative, and the same is true for children. In terms of curiosity, you can see it when a child is curious in something. They're getting into something. They're exploring something, not because they're satisfying some need, but because they're just interested in it. I think that those colloquial ways of thinking about initiative and curiosity serve us very well. Again, initiative, doing something on your own, curiosity, doing something because you want to, not because you're satisfying some internal need. Both of these express themselves through exploration, through testing, through activities like that, and children are just so good at this. They naturally move towards these kinds of activities. They love to explore. They love to test things, because they love to learn. I find it wonderful to watch them doing this, too, because as they're doing this, they are, of course, becoming their full selves. As they explore different colors and decide they like some colors and not other colors, they're becoming the sort of person who likes those colors. It's a joyous process to watch.

Joyce: I love that you said that, because by watching, we learn, because they may not have the words to say, "Hey, I like this certain texture, I like things that are scratchy, and I don't like things that are soft." That's a new idea that my little girl has realized. There are certain things that she doesn't like touching her, and she just realized that in the past few days.

Dawson: That's something that we can share with parents. It's so important to be alive to those physical cues, especially before they have the language to describe for themselves what their interests are. Just follow the child's lead and see their interests blossoming. Again, it's a wonderful thing to watch.

Joyce: Definitely. I think as home visitors, being able to encourage parents of what – all of these things are already happening, and you're already a part of them, so you're already a part of so many of the right things that are happening already. Just affirming that you're in the right place at the right time, and you've got everything that you need within you to be successful. You are successful, so I think that's cool as well.

Dawson, I'm so glad that you mentioned play. We're all about play. We know that, every culture all over the world, children play. It could look different and sound different, but everyone plays everywhere. Even the United Nations considers play the right of every child. What better way to learn about the world around you than through these playful experiences?

That's where we're going to go in the next part of our time together today, is digging deeper into play. Here are some of the benefits of play. The American Academy of Pediatrics, they say, "Hey, these are just some of the great things and benefits of play, – that it supports that healthy brain development, that it allows children a safe place to explore things that are unknown to them in a safe way, and that it's an important part of life and that we all have this biological drive within us to play, much like sleep." Play just happens, to your point, Dawson, in just being there and following the lead. It's just going to happen. We know that so many – many parents and families, many of us, maybe we're a little bit anxious right now with things that are happening around us, whether it's things related to the pandemic or things related to our own households. In our work as home visitors, it's about supporting parents and encouraging them

and highlighting what they're doing right. A lot of times, play is just happening. It's just happening around them, this learning experience. What better thing to encourage parents? Just keep doing that right thing.

Dawson: I can't emphasize that enough, because play is learning, and it is a natural process. Oftentimes, adults will have the impulse to say, "OK, play is happening, but I need to make sure that there's learning happening, too, and that's a separate thing." Not a separate thing. Play is learning. It is where, as you said, children have the opportunity to practice and to try things out in a safe environment. It is so important. In addition to this list, I will also say it's for healthy bodies, too. Not just healthy brain development but healthy body development, too, and setting some good practices in place that can continue for a lifetime and add benefits for an entire lifetime.

Joyce: Yeah, thanks for pointing...

Dawson: Just wanted to get that in there.

Joyce: No, thanks. It's all about the play, and again, it's already happening, so why not help parents to understand and engage in those interactions? It's not one more thing that they have to do, it's something that's already organically happening around them.

Dawson: And joyful.

Joyce: That's it. That is it, definitely. This might be a nice place to stop. We want to hear from you guys out there from our – that are able to join us today from our home visiting community. When you think about play, what comes to mind for you? I'm going to invite you to put it in the Q&A. If you want to jot some things down in your Participant's Guide for today, please do so. We want to hear from you. When you think of play, what do you think of?

Dawson: How about you, Joyce? What do you think of?

Joyce: I think of fun, and I think of adventure. For me, I think of memories of play. My sister and I, we used to – we would play like we were "The A Team" when we were little. We would make things out of nothing, and we would fight over who got to be which character. When I think of play, I think of imagination, because we created our own little world.

Dawson: Sure. You're doing what I think a lot of people do when they talk about play, which is, they smile. Just the memory of it, it brings up that joyfulness that is so central to what play is. And again, it's learning, so joy and learning going together, that's a win-win. I think of outside, myself, a lot, because I spent a lot of time outdoors. I was one of those free-range children and played outside a lot. I really enjoyed the outdoors and still do. I would encourage people to remember that there is play, but there's also playfulness, where you can engage in an activity that you're trying to get something done, but you can be lighthearted about it, and you can be playful as you're doing it. That's a wonderful quality to bring to our lives and to model for our children.

Joyce: Definitely, and some of those same things you just mentioned are things that are coming across in the Q&A. Someone just mentioned that being outside, that that's what they remember, to your point there.

Dawson: I've seen "Getting dirty." I like that.

Joyce: Getting dirty, yeah, that's it. That's the way I look at it. The more fun you have, the dirtier you get. And Jessica, she shares that laughter and enjoyment. Katherine was the one that mentioned being outside.

Dawson: I'd like to remind people again, and I might sound like a broken record here, but children are looking to us from their very earliest days. We know now from their very first hours, they are looking to us as models, and they are emulating us. If we are joyful and happy, that is something that they realize is a part of the adult world and something they want to grow into. I think that sharing that with parents is important to that sense of joy and playfulness in life.

Joyce: Definitely. We'll keep that – keep the Q&A going here. We're going to be coming back to that, as well. Let me pop back up here. We had some great things come in the Q&A, some great ideas around play, and I know for me, it brought back some really great memories. Dawson, can you tell us a little bit more about, what exactly is play and how a home visitor could share those ideas with parents?

Dawson: You could assure parents that play is something that not only happens in every culture, and there are very few things that we can say that about, but it is something that is natural in the animal kingdom. All mammals play, and it's there, because it is a wonderful strategy for learning about the world, as we've said. It's a way to practice. It's a way to engage in activities where the consequences are just, it might not be as fun, not more serious consequences when we're behaving in later life and in different situations. It, of course, changes for different ages. A very young child, for them, play may be feeling textures and rattling a rattle. But as they grow older, their play will become more complex. They can still use that rattle, but they might be using it in different ways. I have a rattle here, and I can use it to make impressions on my Play-Doh, and now I'm doing shapes and things, and it's becoming more sophisticated. It has the ability to grow with a child. It's one of the wonderful things about play, is that it adjusts to the abilities of the child. Especially for children with disabilities or suspected delays but also children just at every developmental level, play is an activity that they can engage in at whatever level that they are at that time. And it can grow along with them. It's a wonderful thing to talk about with IEPs, with IFSPs, with the whole family so they can all get involved and realize just how wonderful this activity is and that it is flexible that way and something that you can grow with.

Joyce: Thanks for sharing all of that, Dawson. I'd love – you mentioned supporting play more, thinking about infants and toddlers. And maybe that part of it can be a little bit intimidating to parents because they're like, "Well, how do I even start with play? I love to play. I can think about great, playful memories," but as a parent, we want to be sure that we're doing it right. We just want to affirm that they are. What are some tips or ideas of what can they do to make play happen?

Dawson: The first thing I want to do is to alleviate the anxiety of doing it right, because as we said earlier, when we were playing, there's no right way to do it. There is just following your impulse. It's a natural impulse that we all have. If your child is beginning to play or you have set

up a situation for them so that they will engage in play, follow the child's lead. They are going to be expressing the approaches to learning, the initiative, and the curiosity in how they play. Your job there is to facilitate that and to enjoy the experience along with them. Again, that infant with the rattle is going to be discovering different things as she plays with that rattle. An older toddler is running outside and running between the trees. Think of all the gross motor stuff that they're learning about, and then, when they get to the tree, the textures of the trees and. Play along with them and enjoy the experience with them.

Know that it doesn't always have to be novel, too. I think this is something that people get tripped up on sometimes, is that play needs to be something new each time, and that's not at all true. People love to do familiar things. The Play-Doh that we're playing with, we played with decades ago, and we still enjoy the experience. It is also useful for a child to have that experience of competence, of knowing, "I know how to do this thing," and that feels good, and that gives them confidence. Then, they can work on the finer parts of how exactly these things work together and how this shape can move into a different shape and how to mold. They're working on all these different skills because they're already familiar with this. This mix of familiar and unfamiliar is useful when it comes to play.

Joyce: I love that you mentioned that. I think the other thing is that what may be very familiar for us as adults are very new to our young children, and so that might be something else just as a reminder of, hey, wow, it's things that we've seen, for parents to realize, "This is a whole new world that I'm getting to support this little person better." I think that's just as important there, so thank you for sharing that, as well.

Dawson: Yeah.

Joyce: We know that within Head Start and Early Head Start, we serve a really diverse group and that home visitors are supporting families from different cultures and beliefs and backgrounds. What can you share with a home visitor about play and culture?

Dawson: This is a really interesting topic. Different cultures have different expectations around play, and they engage in play in different ways. We want to be sensitive to that, so the amount of time that is devoted to play, the type of play, the type of materials that people want children to be playing with. Some cultures will want very dedicated materials – "These are toys, and we want to buy toys that are going to be educational, and we're going to put them here, and they're going to be used in this way," whereas it's much more free-form with other cultures. Let's recognize that this changes from family to family, as well. We want to be accepting of all of these, but we want to remind parents that play is natural. Play is an impulse that we all have and making whatever accommodations for play and helping play happen is something that a family from any culture can do.

And it doesn't have to be expensive, it doesn't have to be difficult. Again, found objects are often the most interesting objects for children to play with. We've all had the experience, I'm sure, that we think we're giving a child a gift, and the box that the gift came in turns out to be the thing that the child is really interested in. They get much more enjoyment and much more learning from experiencing the box than the thing that was in the box, and that's great, because using those materials that are already in place is a way of encouraging families to keep the play

going. You have all you need right here to keep this play going, so use the materials that are available.

Joyce: Definitely. I know with my little one, we thank people for the boxes, because that's the best part of what the gift was. She's all about putting things in boxes and taking things out of the box. The other everyday thing, our new thing now is telling secrets into a glass. She loves yelling into the glass and feeling the vibrations, and we talk about that. That's something that started out of nothing, really, and it's become a whole thing.

Dawson: Yeah. One other thing I do want to mention is one of the ways that children have of learning about their culture is through play. As you play with the child and as you show them the kinds of materials that your family, that your culture, wants to play with, this is a way that they're learning about themselves and about their culture, so play is good for developing that sense of identity and that sense of culture, too. Know that play can work in that way, as well.

Joyce: I love that you mentioned that. Thank you for sharing all of that, and again, we want to stop, because we know that when we talk about play, it does bring up a lot of memories for us, and we've talked about that a little bit. We want to pause here and reflect on, what kind of messages about play did you hear growing up from your family? How was play valued in your family? Did your family members spend time playing with you? What did that look like? Was unsupervised play a thing, or were most activities planned? We're going to give you a minute or two to reflect, we're going to invite you to pull out your Play-Doh and use that. If you need somewhere to kind of think and process with, you've got that. Also, you've got the Q&A that you're free to share in, and there's your Participant's Guide to jot things down in, as well. Take about a minute and ponder on that.

Dawson: I would like to say, as we're all thinking about this, that reflecting on the way that you played as a child is something that is fun to do. We enjoy it, we hope it brings back good memories. But it is also a way of checking yourself and making sure that you don't have expectations about play that might be making it difficult for you to see the other types of play that you could be encouraging. For instance, I had a lot of outdoor play as a child, and we didn't have a lot of toys in the house, but my gosh, playing with toys is wonderful. And I might, if I was talking to parents, forget to mention that part. I think this is a wonderful way of checking ourselves and making sure that we are encompassing the wide world of play when we discuss play, in this case, with parents.

Joyce: I love that you said the "wide world of play" was in the wide world of families that we support, because, as we just talked about, play can look different across cultures, across households, across neighborhoods, across blocks. We have to be sure that we can, as home visitors, open ourselves up to, play could look different from even what I think play could be.

Dawson: Exactly. Structured, unstructured.

Joyce: Yeah, I think that – a little bit of everything, right?

Dawson: Yeah.

Joyce: I was just scrolling through. With that, we're going to keep going, I invite you to keep your Play-Doh out if you want. Now we want to talk a little bit about – we talked about, what is



play, how to start with play, and now we want to get into the why. Why do you think play is so important? Why is it important for parents and families to understand the importance of play and how it works to stimulate that initiative and curiosity?

Dawson: This is fascinating, because play has this internal motivator, which is the fun that we have when we're playing. The skills and the knowledge that we are building when we play, we want to learn those skills. We want to build that knowledge. It's different from other types of learning that way. This is something that came about in terms of evolution, and this built-in motivation is why so many animals engage in play. It's important to learn about the world. It makes you able to navigate the world better, and the same is true of children. How best to motivate them to do that? Make it fun. Give them these practice places that are safe, that they enjoy, and these skills will be built. A skill that might otherwise be frustrating – think of all the fine motor skills that children have to learn. It might be frustrating in certain environments, but if it's in the context of play, they want to learn those skills, and it happens.

The other thing about play that I think is wonderful is that we talk about these different developmental domains as though they existed separately, but they don't. They all overlap. They all interact with one another, and play is absolutely that way. When I am playing with Play-Doh next to a child and I'm talking about what I'm doing, we're developing social and emotional skills. I'm developing language and communication skills. There's the initiative and curiosity we've been talking about, self-expression. There's so much that goes into these simplest acts of just playing. Again, it's one of the richest experiences that we can have as human beings, and it's a deep learning experience. For those reasons, I think it is something that we can't say enough about promoting for children.

Joyce: I love how you made the connection that, in that atmosphere or environment of play, you're supporting all aspects of development. It's not siloed, but it all happens, this wonderful kind of symphony together.

Dawson: "Symphony," nice. Yeah.

Joyce: Thank you for sharing that, Dawson. We want to pop this resource up for you – if you want to know more about the what, why, and the how of play, check out this resource on the ECLKC, the "News You Can Use," here, and there's a link included in your resource guide, so be sure and check that out.

We're going to keep moving, and now we have – we've talked about the what, the why of play, and now we want to talk about the fun stuff and get into the how a little bit more. Dawson, I'm going to turn it over to you to guide us through some more Play-Doh play again, and just remember, if you don't have the Play-Doh, it is completely OK.

Dawson: OK, I think my –

Joyce: [Inaudible] planned.

Dawson: Excellent, I think I'm on the other camera now. Switching camera is always a little difficult. OK, making the familiar unfamiliar again is something that I love to do when I'm playing. I will take a familiar material like Play-Doh, and I'll try and think, how can I make this unfamiliar to myself? What is something that I might not use this for but that I could actually? I

could make myself a little finger puppet. I could do that. And I can make it come up, and I can take my pencil and poke in little eyes there, and I can make a little puppet, and now I can have a little puppet show. I can make a ring, and I can look through the ring, or I can wear the ring. I can make myself some jewelry to wear. I mentioned this before, but I'm talking while I'm playing. This is, I think, a good habit to get into when you're playing with children, something that you can advise parents to do, too, because this is how we build vocabulary. Oftentimes children are listening, and they're taking in these words. They're not trying to talk them back right away, but they're taking it in. They are listening. They need to hear a word a number of times before they can deploy it themselves, before they'll be able to use it themselves. I can talk about the ring here, and I can talk about how I wish I was a little ant going around the ring and this is my whole world. It would be like a racetrack for ants. Now, I'm bringing imagination into this experience. Again, a different kind of play. You can ask questions of children as you're playing. "What would happen if we had some Play-Doh that was old and dry? I found some. Darn, is there something that we can do with that?" Yes, let's ask this child, "Look, what's happening to the Play-Doh there? And what do you think would happen if we put a little water on it?" This is, by the way, a good technique. If your Play-Doh gets dry, put a little water into it, and then knead it back in there, and you can make that stuff work again. It works just fine. But again, I'm relating to the child. This is social and emotional learning. This is very rich language and communication learning. There's so much that can be done with simple play that anyone can do. It doesn't take expensive equipment, it just takes the right mindset, and that mindset is one of joy. I'm going to come back to my other camera now.

Joyce: Thanks for sharing that, Dawson. I know you're toggling back, I see you're back with us now.

Dawson: Yes. Talked through that process, but I think we also want to talk about some different kinds of play going forward. Is that right, Joyce?

Joyce: Yes, definitely.

Dawson: As we're talking about play, I think we need to remind ourselves that play comes in many different forms, and there are different kinds of play. There is what's called messy play, which isn't always messy. There is rough and tumble play. There is outdoor play, of course. There are a lot of people who want to talk about play, so they talk about free play and guided play and co-opted play. There's all sorts of different kinds of play, and know that they're all helpful, and children can learn using any of these kinds of play.

Joyce: Like you said, there's all different kinds of play. Today, we're just going to talk about a few. Can you tell us a little bit more about messy play and what it is, and does it have to be messy all the time? I'm sure that that's a question that home visitors are just expecting, right? I know if I put this out there, that's going to be the first question.

Dawson: Yeah, there is bad advertising in just the name "messy play," because it is not always messy. I do want to say that sometimes messy play can be messy, and we don't want to always avoid messiness, because we all want some experience with mud, sticky things, and that's good. But what messy play really means is, as you can see on the screen here, it's defined as play that emphasizes active exploration of materials and their properties. This is when children

are exploring materials as materials. How wet is this water? How does it pour? How does it work? How does it soak into the grass? These are all instances of messy play, but it is also messy play when a child is playing with a block and feeling the sides and the edges. It's trying to understand different objects and how those objects work, how that child can experience those objects. Not always messing about, not always messy. I like to talk about it as – what it really means is messing about. I'm messing about, I'm experimenting with things. I am trying different things. I'm exploring, I'm testing. Children pouring water are an excellent example of this. It is that sensory experience. They get the sounds of that experience. They can do it again and again, which is important to both play and experimentation of all kinds. These are little scientists, and this is what they're doing when they are playing like this. They are gathering data just like a scientist does. I do want to have a small aside here, and it is this – children need to experiment in all different areas, in all of their developmental domains. One is social and emotional, and when children, especially older toddlers, experiment in this and test the limits and try and figure out what's going on with social and emotional stuff, sometimes it seems like resistance. We're all familiar with the, "No. No." That happens because it's an interesting tool to say, "No," because it's confusing sometimes when things are permitted and when they're not, and when I'm allowed a little pushback and when I'm not, so I'm going to test that. It's the same kind of test as pouring water over and over, so it doesn't necessarily mean that the child is being resistant or intransigent. They're doing what experiments they can do. I sometimes think that it's best, in the heat of the moment sometimes, when that stomping of the foot is going on, and that child just is saying, "No, no, no" – it's hard to remember, but if we can remember – this is an experiment. It doesn't mean that I need to rise to that level and feel anger of my own, it means that I can appreciate it for what it is. This is an experiment, and we're helping them move through this experiment. I find it helpful, and especially raising my own children, I've found it helpful to have that in the back of my mind when those difficult times came up. That might be something that's helpful to share with parents, as well.

Joyce: I love that you mentioned that about the scientist and that even the "no" is just a part of the process. That's what this whole thing is, it's just the process. Even when you're hearing those "no"s, that actually means, "Hey, we're doing things right, because we're getting to the next part of this wonderful, great experiment."

Dawson: Exactly. Again, it crosses all of the domains. All of them are being learned through this process of play.

Joyce: I also loved how you mentioned reminding yourself, and as home visitors, you can remind parents that it may not feel like it in the moment, but those "no"s and some of that resistance is all part of that process of play and experimenting with the world around them.

Dawson: Yeah. I pushed this off my tray and it goes to the ground. I want to do that a bunch of times because it is kind of fun, but it's also really interesting. The first few times I did this, the dog licked it off the floor. If the dog is in the other room and I do it, is it going to happen again? Does the dog hear it? It becomes increasingly complex really quickly, and it's kind of joyous that way, when you think about it.

Joyce: Yeah, that's a daily experiment at my house, how many things the dog can eat off the floor. But I'm going to remind myself this just means I'm doing things right, and...

Dawson: That's right. What a great little scientist I have.

Joyce: That's it, and what better message that we can share as home visitors with the families that we're supporting? Thank you for that, Dawson.

Dawson: Mm-hmm.

Joyce: We're talking about these open-ended materials and what messy play can look like. Can you give us an example of what messy play can look like in action with just the materials that could be found around the house pretty easily?

Dawson: Absolutely, and here's one that I love to do. Children love tearing paper. Why not let them give into that impulse and give them a place where they can do it? I like to set up a box with some newspaper in it and let children go to that box when they like and tear the paper and play with it. It's something that is kind of a station. It can be there, they can go when they want, and it is always available to them. With older toddlers, I would sometimes remind them that, "We send packages from our house, and we like to have packing materials, so if you could help us by tearing some of that, whenever you get a chance, go over there and tear that up. That will be helpful to us." Then the child can get a sense that they are contributing to the family, too. Play can work in that way, as well. Again, messy play does not need to be messy. This is messy play, experimenting with these materials and the ability to do it over and over, but it doesn't need to be messy at all.

Joyce: Thanks for sharing that. Now, let's talk about rough and tumble play. What is it? We know it can make parents and adults and even us home visitors a little nervous, so can you help us to find some language and some reassurance to share with parents about rough and tumble play?

Dawson: Absolutely, and I think we know what it is. It's there in the title. It is rough, and it is tumble. It is running. It is jumping. It is chasing. It is sometimes wrestling, and, yes, it can make parents very nervous. But it's OK, and it is OK for children to play in this way. Sometimes it's very productive. Of course, we want to be careful with it. There should always be an adult present, and we want to oversee how this is happening. But let's remember, children need to learn about their bodies. They need to learn about how their bodies relate to other bodies, and rough and tumble play can be an exciting, joyous thing for them to engage in. I would say, when you can, it is good to let children engage in this kind of play. This is social and emotional learning, too, because children need to know when is enough and when is too much. Learning when another child is laughing because they're enjoying something and when they're laughing because they're really nervous and they hope that this is going to stop soon – they're both laughter, and so learning to distinguish between those two things can be a little difficult, and children need practice with that. From the other side, that child needs to learn how to express themselves and be direct. These are all learning moments, and in the context of play, in the context of safety, when the adult is there and overseeing things, this is a wonderful time for children to learn these things. Our goal in being with children is not to make sure that we get to the end of the day with no messes made and no problems had. We don't want to intentionally make problems, but when problems arise, let's remember that that's part of life. Children need to learn how to deal with these problems. These are opportunities. Again, rough and tumble

play, I understand why people are resistant to it, but it can be beneficial to children's development when done safely and under the supervision of a caring and attentive adult.

Joyce: I know you mentioned rough-and-tumble play. It can happen outside, it could happen inside, again, with supervision and done correctly. Let's talk a little bit about outside. We know right now, because of the pandemic, it's changed the way that we spend time together a lot of ways, as family, with friends. Can you tell us some ideas, some strategies about taking it outside and play outside?

Dawson: Yes. I am a believer in going outside, and it's not just my own experience, although that certainly fuels my enthusiasm for being outside. But it is also knowing that being outside is, generally speaking, a much richer sensual experience, sensory experience. Being outside the air changes. It changes from one season to the next, how it smells, how it feels. This is where it is more often appropriate for children to run, to jump, to exercise their whole bodies and to interact with other children in those ways. There's a lot of activities that can happen outside that can't happen inside, and when they happen outside, generally speaking, they are full of sensory experiences that are sometimes unique to the outside. When you think about the interior spaces that we create, generally we're creating them for our comfort, so they're in a very narrow range of temperature. All of the floors are level. We have nice, comfortable places to sit, which is all great, but when you're outside, what are going to sit on? Can you sit on a log? Can you sit on a stump? Can you sit on a curb? There's a lot of different experiences that will happen outside that you can't have inside. I would say whenever you can, take children outside. And people have different access to the outside, I get that. But even just outside in a fenced-in area is beneficial for children.

Joyce: Right, and all great messages that we can share with parents and families out there. And the resources, we included resources on taking it outside.

For our last few minutes, we're going to talk about effective practices that you can use as home visitors to support play, so you see them here on the screen. We're going to talk about them briefly on, what could this look like? First, we're going to talk just about preparing the environment, about supporting the parents' role as far as preparing that environment, what it could look like. Dawson, any ideas of what that could look like in action?

Dawson: Absolutely. If you have space, having a dedicated play space is great, because that's a constant cue to the child that this is a place where I can go and where I know what kinds of activities are expected of me. Not everyone has that kind of space, but it doesn't need to be big. It can be just a rug. It can be even just a shelf, a little area next to a shelf. Oftentimes parents will set up a shelf with a few play items on it, and then the child knows that that's their shelf. They get to play there. Another thing to do is to have a bin that comes out. You can put it away and then bring it out, and that could be kind of fun because, what's going to be in the play bin this time? If that happens at a regular time, then that is another pattern that you can establish, and we know that children respond very well to patterns, that when this time of day comes around, when the rug gets rolled out, I know that it's time for this kind of activity. Again, having a regularity to it is helpful. Having a space dedicated to it can be helpful.

I would also like to mention, with the outdoor play, remember that the outdoors can be brought in, too. Leaves can be played with inside, bringing some leaves and putting them in a bucket and feeling the leaves, bringing some rocks in. We have a – when my children were very young and, even now, still, we actually still have it, we have a season desk where whatever the season is, we bring in some items from outside and put them on this desk. Right when you come in, you can play with it, and I still play with it as an adult, so again, having a special place is often helpful.

Joyce: Wow, that's some great ideas to be able to share and great ideas to think about with our conversations with parents as far as helping to prepare that environment. Thanks for sharing that.

Next is modeling persistence, encouraging parents to model persistence, being there alongside their child while they're working through different ways to play with the box, different ways to stack the boxes on top of each other. Being curious requires persistence in a lot of ways, so just being there as a parent and encouraging them, just being present, you are doing the right thing just to be there in the moment as the support as the child is working through all that. Just by being there, they're winning, so that's another practice there.

Then we talk about autonomy a little bit. How can home visitors support parents with providing autonomy to their children?

Dawson: The modeling persistence is so important, and research has been done on this, that if a child sees an adult working hard at something, they are more likely to work hard at that thing, too. Again, enjoy their company. Be there with them, and model persistence is so great.

Providing autonomy with them as much as possible – children can't do everything for themselves, but when they can, they love the triumph of learning a new skill, of getting something done. As my children used to say, "Self it, Daddy. Self it." And as much as you can – yes, you may need to help them squeeze out the paint from the tube or set things up. But if they're having a little difficulty with something, let them work through it as much as possible, because that's the edge at which those skills are being developed, and they're learning more and more as they're working through that for themselves.

Joyce: Thanks for that, Dawson, lots of great ideas to share. Wrapping things up, thinking about making it social, any ideas there, Dawson, as far as what that could look like for home visitors and things that they could share with parents that they're supporting?

Dawson: Absolutely. Again, talk about the play as it's going on. Even before you think children are ready for that kind of language, they are ready. They're listening to the richness of your language and how you're talking. Then asking questions of the child, using language, using gestures, you can ask a question with a gesture, too. Making this a social occasion, making it a time that you enjoy together and using all of your communication to do that with language, gestures, playing alongside and modeling, and introducing vocabulary as it comes up. "This is squishy." Squishy might not have been a word they heard before, and how does it relate to tacky? Sorry if I'm feeling rushed, I'm seeing we're nearing the end of our time, and I have so much I want to say. Apologies.

Joyce: I know. The one thing I'm thinking, the ways all these things connect with each other. You can't do one of these things without connecting with the other. I think if we have to leave you with one thing to support parents with, it's encouraging them to just have fun. At the end of the day, if they're having fun, their kids are having fun, they're learning, that's what it's all about. Encourage the fun factor in whatever they choose to do, related to play. Anything you want to add in there, Dawson?

Dawson: No, I just want to foot stomp what you just said, it is so true. How many things in life do we get to say, "One indication of it going well is that I really enjoy it"?

Joyce: Yeah, definitely.

Dawson: But that's true of the learning that happens during play, so enjoy. Please share this with parents – enjoy your child's company, and if both of you are happy, that's an indication that it's going well.

Joyce: Thank you so much for being there with us today. Just want to pop this quick resource up here. If you want to hear more from Dawson and the I-LABS team, I encourage you to check out – they have some amazing videos about, "It's Time for Play!" You can learn more about different ways to play and interact with them, and we have that in the resource guide, as well, so I encourage you to do that. Thank you so much for joining us. Thank you, Dawson, for being here with us, and we'll catch you next time in April. Thank you so much.

Dawson: Thank you all for the work that you do, sincerely.