

Fostering Inclusive Play for All Infants and Toddlers

Beth Zack: To have you here with us today. Today we're talking about fostering inclusive play for all infants and toddlers. For those of you joining Baby Talks for the first time, Baby Talks is a series of webinars for teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors working with infants and toddlers in Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and American Indian and Alaska Native programs. These webinars are designed to introduce you to research about infant and toddler development. My name is Beth Zack and I'm here with my colleague, Marie Baeta.

Marie Baeta: Hi everyone, we're from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning, NCECDTL. We're based at ILABS, the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington. ILABS, an NCECDTL partner organization, is an interdisciplinary research center dedicated to understanding human learning with a focus on early learning and the brain.

Beth: Now that you know a little about us, let's talk about play.

Marie: One of my favorite things to do.

Beth: Me too. Play is an important part of childhood that helps children learn and grow. It supports their brain development and the development of skills across the Early Learning Outcomes Framework, or the ELOF learning domains. We've linked to the ELOF for you in your viewer's guide.

Marie: Research shows that play provides many of the same benefits to adults as it does to children, from boosting creativity, to building relationships, to supporting physical and mental health. Not only that, it's also fun for us.

Beth: Before we jump into our content, I just want to take a moment to go over our learning objectives for today. The first is to describe infant and toddler play through a lens of equity, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness. The second is to identify strategies to create playful learning experiences that are accessible and meaningful to all infants and toddlers.

This includes setting up those play experiences that can support children's IFSP goals. To get us started today, we'd love for you to think about the role of play in your own lives. What is your favorite way to play as an adult? Now this is meant to just be a quick reflection, but we do invite you to share using the Q&A widget if you feel comfortable. We also have space for you in your viewer's guide.

Marie: Something that's helpful when you're thinking about, if you're having trouble trying to think of what it's like to play, something that's helpful is tapping into the feelings of play. Play is something you choose freely, that gives you positive feelings, and that is flexible. Also known as

flow state, that feeling that I relate to when the world just kind of melts away. For me, playing sports and doing art is mostly how I play.

Beth: Flow state, I love that. When I was thinking about this question, I realized I enjoy a lot of different kinds of play, from moving my body through group exercise and hiking, to playing card games with my daughter, or drawing. One of the things that's really cool about play is that even though it can look different for adults, it also shares similar characteristics of play for children. Like me, my daughter also enjoys moving her body, but she often does this by jumping all over the place or just dancing around.

Marie: I see here in the chat, folks say that they love playing through fishing, or doing puzzles, or playing with their pets, playing games with other adults. I see some outdoors, some physical, some connecting with your animals, some connecting with like social connections with other adults, coloring, getting in those art activities, photography, such a variety.

Beth: Some of these ways are solitary, things you'd like to do on your own. Some are more social, might provide connection for you, or focus on creativity or that physical movement. We really appreciate you all sharing and getting us thinking about the different ways that we as adults like to play.

Marie: Play is universal. It even appears in non-human mammals and birds. Although play is universal, how we play and what play looks like varies across individuals, families, cultures, and communities. This is evident just in all the ways that you all just shared how you like to play.

Beth: Play doesn't always have to look like building with blocks or board games. It can take on many forms and it can happen anywhere from a little baby just kicking up their toys with their feet, to playing peekaboo, to even routines like bath time, or a child helping feed chickens on their family farm. As we just mentioned, it can also happen alone or with others, and it can be adult, or child-driven.

Marie: It's important to keep this in mind as we observe and learn more about children's play, that these differences create beautiful varieties of play.

Beth: In order to practice equity, we need to show up with a curious mind to help us understand and value all the different kinds of play.

Marie: We'd like to highlight some specific way that play can vary for children. I think this next quote really summarizes the spectrum of how play is viewed. Play has greatly varied significance for child development across cultures. In some, it's considered a pivotal building block, and in others it's viewed merely as an incidental activity.

Beth: We have different cultural views of play, including what is defined as play, what it looks like, and the role and importance of it in children's daily lives. For example, our own comfort level with how messy children get with play, that can also be cultural, but then it also can be based on our own preferences.

Marie: Can our level of expression and restraint during play. Do you mask feelings or do you tend to be more expressive? Maybe a child who seems aggressive or loud to you might be simply more expressive and engaging in play in a way that they're more familiar with within their family or culture.

Beth: That's a great example. I also want to bring up imitation here because it's a type of play that we see across cultures, although what children are imitating and the roles that they're playing, that's really based on what they're observing and they're experiencing in their family and their culture. For example, some babies and toddlers, they may pretend, put that phone to their ear, whereas others are pretending to build a fire or hold and feed a little baby.

Marie: When we're thinking about older toddlers, do the children pretend to be construction workers or farmers taking care of animals or maybe driving buses in a big city. Or maybe they pretend to have two moms and two dads because that's their experience at home.

Beth: In some families, we have parents and grandparents and adult caregivers who regularly play with their children. But in other families and cultures that may be more unfamiliar or uncomfortable. A child in this type of culture might appear anxious or even confused if a teacher or family child care provider were to join in their play. In some families, play is focused on teaching skills and in others, and in others, it's all about creating warm bonds and having fun together. Or it could be a combination of both of those. We've talked about some variations, but we just want to highlight a few specific research examples to give you a better glimpse into the diversity of play across cultures.

Marie: These are fun. The game of peekaboo is a popular game for adults and children across the world, but they also have cultural variations. In Japanese, Korean, and Italian families, the surprise reappearance is accompanied by a silly, unpredictable word.

Beth: I love that. In Tajikistan, which is a country in Central Asia, babies spend up to 20 hours a day in a tightly wrapped swaddle as part of the culture's Gavora cradling practice. Babies there actually often have little to no opportunities for play.

Marie: In social play varies across cultures, too. In some cultures, and families, social play is emphasized more than playing with toys, and this extends beyond adult caregivers and often includes older siblings, cousins, or neighborhood play.

Beth: These are just three examples to show how much play can vary. Because play varies, we want you to focus on the idea today that we cannot take this one-size-fits-all approach to how we understand and support children's playful learning.

Marie: One of the first things we need to do is think about our own assumptions and expectations around play. One assumption that adults sometimes make about infants especially is that they don't play or they're not ready for real play yet.

Beth: We know that cannot be further from the truth. When an infant makes a funny face at you with their peer, they're kicking their little legs on a mobile, or even chewing on a soft toy, they are playing.

Marie: Research is another area that informs our expectations and how we support play.

Beth: I know this firsthand as a former researcher, but I also know this can be problematic. In research, we often refer to the acronym WEIRD. It stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. Those are the societies that research is often based on and the lens through which many researchers over the years have viewed and understood their data. But if we only view play through this this weird lens, we miss some of those beautiful variations on how children play and those variations in play across cultures.

Marie: We value different types of play differently, whether we're aware of it or not. Within Western societies, WEIRD societies, adults often place higher value on play that seems productive, that is artistic, creative, musical, dramatic. Play that tends to be less valued includes play fighting, playing in the rain, playing with conflict or issues like death or grief, repetitive play, daydreaming. This reminds me of a quote about inclusive play. It says, "valuing the broad spectrum of play types means that the setting will be closer to accommodating children's different ways of being and expressing themselves."

Beth: That really highlights our values, they influence our learning space and the support that we provide.

Marie: Our attitudes and mindsets are consistently identified as the most important factors in adults' ability to effectively support inclusive play and shape the possibilities of children's play, especially with children with disabilities. Our own cultural experiences with play influence how we interpret body language, how children express themselves, what's acceptable or not, and what we think requires intervention or not, or what toys are appropriate for whom.

Beth: For example, some adults have expectations about gender roles in play. If a boy is playing dress up, they might redirect them to something else because it makes them feel uncomfortable, not because there's anything wrong with it. It goes beyond redirection. We also want you to think about what toys you're offering to babies and toddlers. Do you tend to offer girls one type of toy and boys another type?

Marie: This is important of being observant and curious about your own perspective and how you approach different kinds of play is really critical for uncovering your own biases and practices. Do you intervene more often in certain types of play? Do you engage or support a certain type of play?

Beth: We encourage you to take time to investigate your own internal values and your experience around play and how this can influence how you approach play. Looking beyond our own personal assumptions and expectations is an important part of viewing and supporting play through an equity lens. Equity means the fair and just treatment of all children, families,

and those who support them. Equity enables everyone to achieve their full potential. When we lead with equity, we see each child as a child first. A child is more than their ability level, past experiences, the languages they speak, or any other label.

Marie: Remember that each child is unique. Infants and toddlers engage and play in different ways. They develop skills at different rates, both for typical development and children with disabilities or suspected delays.

Beth: We can use our knowledge of child development and understanding of each individual child to adapt playful learning experiences to meet children of different ability levels where they are. To foster play in all children, we need to think about access and participation. Increased access leads to a higher level of participation, and we know there's a strong connection between participation and learning. When children don't engage with people and activities and materials in a meaningful way, their opportunity for learning can be impacted. This can be especially true for children with disabilities.

Marie: What strategies do we have to design an environment that provides access to participation in play? This includes making sure activities and engagements are physically accessible, but also include a range of ways for the child to participate.

Beth: A great way to do this is to include loose parts and open-ended materials that can be explored in different ways. With open-ended materials, children get to decide how to play with them. Let's take a set of cups. One child might bang those cups together or just choose to just carry that cup around.

Marie: Another one might nest them, while another one uses them to dump and fill, and another one might use it to give a doll a drink or a peer a pretend drink.

Beth: We'll talk more about open-ended play in a bit, but it's important to keep in mind that providing a variety of open-ended materials and those individualized supports gives each child the pathway to fully and independently participate in play, either on their own or with their peers. Let's think about infants who spend a lot of time on the floor.

Think about how materials can be made accessible for them. You place toys on low shelves, you can put visuals like mirrors and pictures of the infant's family on those low floor surfaces or on vertical surfaces that are low to the floor. We can also help families think about how objects and materials can be placed in their home for their infant or toddler to safely access.

Marie: Beyond the physical environment, we also want to think about the social environment and access and participation in social interactions. For toddlers, you might create opportunities for them to play next to their peers, and this can support their social development too. To get us thinking more about access and participation, we thought it'd be fun to play a short game of I Spy. I spy with my little eye something blue. Maybe, Beth's screen. Let's look for something blue. Do you see it? If you do, you could share it in the Q&A widget. Let's see. Anyone see it? I see Beth's blue necklace.

Beth: Yep, there it is. One thing that I love about I Spy is that you can start playing this game even with young toddlers. You can point and label at that blue object, and that'll support their language development, but they also have fun learning about colors. You could even mix it up and try using shapes instead of colors. I spy something that's a circle.

Marie: You can also play this game anywhere, from video chats, to a child's home, to outside, or on the go, or even in the car. Because we're talking about fostering inclusive play, we want to invite you to think about ways to adapt I Spy to make it accessible to all.

Beth: Let's do that. Let's think about what if you're working with a child who has visual impairments. How could you adapt this activity so the child can participate? Rather than I Spy, how about a game of I Hear?

Marie: Rather than sight, you can engage other senses like hearing. Maybe I hear with my little ear something crinkly. What do you think made that sound? Any guesses?

Beth: I'm going to guess, was it a baby toy?

Marie: No, but sometimes these things are in baby toys. A straw wrapper. Yeah, a candy wrapper. We're all very close.

Beth: What if that was either too easy or too challenging for the children that you're playing with? How could you adapt the activity even further? One thing you might do is try some other sounds. You could strum on a guitar, pop some bubble wrap, or just tap your hands on a desk. You don't need to stop with sight or hearing. You could also adapt I Spy into a game of I Smell, I Taste, or even I Touch. The key here is considering how you can meet the needs of all the children that you're working with.

Marie: Like we did in this game, it often means taking a multi-sensory approach and reimagining some of the activities that you may already do or creating new activities. The goal is for all children to have access to materials and activities to be able to fully participate and play across all of the learning environments. There is a framework called Universal Design for Learning, or UDL for short, that we can use to do just that. We've also linked this in your viewer's guide.

Beth: UDL is based on research and it can guide you as you create playful learning experiences and design your learning environments to support all infants and toddlers, including children with disabilities or suspected delays. We can think of this as an equity tool.

Marie: There are three principles of UDL. Engagement, representation, and action and expression. For engagement, supporting engagement and learning by building on infant and toddler development and interest and providing choices. Representation means providing a variety of ways to learn new skills and information. Action and expression allow flexibility in how infants and toddlers demonstrate success and understanding.

Beth: We'll revisit all these today because we're going to use these principles to really guide our thinking about setting up the learning space and selecting materials to support play in all infants and toddlers. UDL is all about flexibility and not only how children access materials and participate, but also in really focusing on children's individual strengths.

Marie: We don't want to limit children to a single way of participating.

Beth: There's no one-size-fits-all approach to play and learning. By using these principles of UDL, we can help ensure that children can fully engage and play in meaningful, culturally responsive, and developmentally appropriate ways.

Marie: It's about being intentional about it as well.

Beth: Being intentional is going to carry through everything from planning activities to selecting materials and arranging the learning space. Before we dive into these three principles, we just want to mention that a big part of making play inclusive for all children is really to first learn about the children in your care or in your family caseload if you're a home visitor. Here are just some questions to consider. What are their likes and dislikes? What languages do they hear and speak at home? Does their family have cultural expectations around play? How do they prefer to communicate? How does their family like to play?

Marie: These are so important for understanding how to set up learning spaces, materials, planning activities to meet all infants and toddlers' play needs. A lot of what you'll learn comes from simple observation and awareness. Notice how children engage in play on their own or with others. Notice how they navigate the learning space.

Beth: You might notice that some children prefer to spend longer periods of time engaged in solitary play, and that is okay. Even if a child does prefer to play on their own, just be sure to check in on them and even join in their play sometimes throughout the day. You could also place the materials they enjoy playing with near their peers to support social play when they feel ready.

My own daughter has spent time throughout the day engaged in longer periods of solitary play since the time she was an infant. She also loves playing with other kids, but she really uses that solitary play time as downtime, especially if things are feeling a little too loud in other places, and she can just like get deep into whatever it is that's interesting her when she has that solitary play time.

Marie: Watching children play with materials can give you insight into their cultural practices. For instance, in one study, researchers added a blanket to the classroom dramatic play area in Saudi Arabian, United States, and South African early childhood settings, and they found that the children use the blankets in different ways depending on their location. Boys in Saudi Arabia wore the blanket on their head as a traditional Arab headdress. In the U.S., children used it to cover a doll on a bed, and in South Africa, children wrapped a doll on a blanket and carried it on their back.

Beth: This is such a great example of using just a single material to support play across cultures. I love that, and it also emphasizes the power of observation. Noticing how children are using different materials. Notice when they're engaged and participating and showing confidence, and then this can help you identify ways to support them in other activities. This idea brings us back to our first UDL principle, multiple means of engagement. Just a reminder, this principle is all about supporting children's engagement and playful learning by building on infant and toddler development and children's interests.

Marie: How could we apply this to play?

Beth: Think about what motivates an individual child and captures their attention. Ask yourself what is meaningful and culturally relevant to them? What will motivate them to play with materials more and explore more and to join in activities and engage with their peers?

Marie: Because we're talking about fostering inclusive play, we also want to ask, how can I make this activity or these materials more accessible so all children can participate?

Beth: Let's dive into these ideas a bit more.

Marie: Culture is at the heart of who we are. It influences everything from language, child rearing practices, to family structure, to how families view disabilities and their expectations around play, like we talked about earlier. Remember that not all people from one culture will act the same or have the same values or expectations. Showing cultural responsiveness means taking a strengths-based approach. Respect the role of culture in a child's development and how they play.

Beth: A key part of this is really connecting with families, having conversations with them, learning about their child's strengths and their family's cultures and values and expectations around play. Then you use what you learn to create culturally responsive learning environments and to really build belonging with children and families. This is true whether you're in a classroom, a family child care, or on a home visit.

Marie: This relationship goes both ways. Take time to share with families what their child likes to play with in the learning space and what their strengths are in play.

Beth: These conversations can really shape a family's expectations in positive big ways. They might not realize some of the things that their child's able to do if they've never tried until you share that they're doing it every day maybe in your learning space. Then after conversations, we just encourage you to honor children's cultures and their experiences. This is more than just, checking that box like, oh, I included this book or this artifact from a child's culture.

You really want to ask children and families how they like to play and invite them into your learning community to share about their culture or traditions or ways that they enjoy playing if they feel comfortable. Then continue to observe the child to get a better understanding of their interests. When we know more about children and families, we can make more meaningful connections for them and create playful learning experiences.

Marie: Those meaningful connections are what help motivate children. A quick note, that meaning, and culture can be tied together, but they don't have to be. Infants and toddlers use play to make sense of their experience and they learn best when play is meaningful and relevant to them.

Beth: As you're observing children, think about the social and emotional connection you have with the infants and toddlers you work with too. Children, they feel more secure in their space and their relationships. When they feel more secure in their space and relationships, they're going to be more likely to explore. They develop that sense of security and that connection with adults through an adult's responsive care.

Marie: Interests can be different between child to child, also across development for the same child as they grow from infants to toddlers. A child's gender, their temperament, life experiences, family culture, or even current popular characters or toys can influence what and how they like to play.

Beth: You want to add items to the learning space that will spark a child's interest. Let's say you have a child who's been slow to warm up playing with their peers. Find out what they like to play with at home, so those conversations with families, and then incorporate some of those items in your space and see if that helps.

Marie: What about children who are dual language learners who don't share the language of other children in your learning space?

Beth: This is a question that we hear a lot, and I just like to say the beauty of play is that children don't need language to play. Sure, they use it, but they can also interact with their peers using their actions and gestures and their eye gaze.

Marie: I'm also guessing that maybe some of you are curious about applying this to babies. Babies are known to have strong preferences, and they'll tell you what they like with their eyes and their cries and their wiggles and their giggles. Some babies might enjoy exploring objects with their hands while others prefer their mouth or feet. Even how long they pay attention to something is a clue about what captures their interest. When you know how a child likes to play, you're in a better position to guide that play towards effective learning, and this is true for all ages.

Beth: Now we want to apply what we've learned about engagement principles. We're going to use this adult-guided play activity as our starting point. At ILABS, we developed a series of free research-based activities that we called at-home activities, but these can be done in any

learning space or anywhere. We designed them to be accessible and easy to set up when using everyday objects and materials.

Marie: We know that young children love filling spaces, whether they're packing, stacking, or putting things in order, so we turn it into an activity called tape puzzles. We're purposely sharing this idea designed for slightly older toddlers or preschoolers so we can chat about adapting it for different ability levels. For this game, we put painter's tape on the floor to mark off an enclosed space and then have children see how many of a particular object they can fit inside.

Beth: Now we're going to show you a short clip of our colleague Dawson showing one variation of this activity in action. This clip was taken from NCECDTL's It's Time for Play video series, which we also linked for you in your viewer's guide. Let's take a peek.

[Video begins]

[Music]

[Video ends]

Marie: Dawson just showed us one of the ways this activity could look, but we know from our conversations today that we can't take a one-size-fits-all approach to play.

Beth: I love how adaptable this activity is and that you can use it for free play in the future. You can just tape off the space on the floor so this activity can be done at any time. You can also let children choose how to fill that space by what motivates and interests them. It could be blocks like we saw in the video, but it could be anything from cars, to animals, to crayons, to large beads.

Marie: Or even something from nature like leaves or large stones, if that's an important part of a family's values or culture.

Beth: Now we'd like for you to think about how you might adapt this game for infants and toddlers with differing ability levels. We included space for you in your viewer's guide to jot down any notes. We also invite you to share your ideas via the Q&A widget if you'd like.

Marie: We'll give you a minute or two to maybe think about some ideas for adapting and sharing. While you do, we'd love to share some ideas as well. To maybe decrease the challenge, you might provide larger items or turn it into a game to see if a single object can fit in the space. Children could separate objects into a fit and don't fit piles, or maybe you announce too big and a silly voice every time one doesn't fit.

Beth: We have some great suggestions coming in. One idea is to create a confined space like a shoebox lid or a laundry basket to help keep items contained. I love that. You could also tape the lid to a table to keep it from moving away, and this also gives children the opportunity then to participate off the floor, either sitting or standing.

Marie: That's a great idea. You might challenge older toddlers to stack within a space taped up to a wall for some vertical play. This could be great for a child who likes to move around a bit more, who likes to stack and build during play.

Beth: Filling a tissue box with scarves. I love that. It's a little bit more movable, so how you fit stuff in there. I love that. So many great ideas coming in. Thanks so much for sharing with us. We did this activity because we're hoping it sparks ideas for you in thinking about adapting materials and activities in your own learning space or to share with families on home visits. We've linked to these ILABS resources for you in your viewer's guide as well.

Marie: We want to recap some of the strategies that came up for the engagement principle and highlight a couple of new ones.

Beth: One of the big things that we've talked about is providing those choices during play. Think of materials that are accessible and meaningful and culturally responsive. Children love making decisions about how they engage in play and research shows that children tend to be more motivated to participate in activities when they're given choices.

Marie: Let's watch a short video clip of a teacher offering an infant choice in what and how she plays.

[Video begins]

Teacher: Let's see. What do you choose, huh? Gonna have the purple ring.

Child: Yeah.

Teacher: Oh, you're going to use the ladybug, huh? Ladybug, ladybug, shake, shake, shake. Ladybug, ladybug, shake, shake, shake.

[Video ends]

Beth: I get that ladybug, ladybug, shake, shake, shake in my head, ever since I found this video. I just love it. What we see in this clip is the teacher is offering the baby choices. She lets her select from the basket rather than just handing her any toy. This is not complicated. But play does not have to be. The child chooses to engage with that ladybug shaker and she does this through touch and also by making a sound. Then the teacher follows her lead with that song and supporting her continued engagement.

Marie: It's fun to watch and remember when providing choices, you can be strategic in what you offer. You can think about tying choices to a child's interest and avoid offering choices that might cause you more stress.

Beth: If you don't have a lot of time or don't feel like you have the mental capacity to deal with a big mess on a particular day, then you don't have to offer something messy as a choice.

Marie: That's completely okay and that's also a great tip for home visitors to share with families too.

Beth: Providing choices also goes beyond those materials and activities. We also want you to think about the learning space and whether children have opportunities to do things on their own or with their peers.

Marie: Physical accessibility is another important piece of engagement. Looking around your learning space, do all the children have space to move around and to engage in on their own? Sometimes you might have to make modifications or small changes to the learning environment including activities, materials, or interactions to support the participation of an individual child. Modifications are usually simple and easy to set up like providing an easel or paper in the art area or for some children who might need to tape the paper down to the table or even to the floor to hold it in space and they can choose how to engage.

Beth: For home visitors, work with families to identify ways to modify the home and the group socialization environment. You might have to encourage parents' creative thinking here, especially if their home space is small. For example, maybe this small piece of furniture or plants, it be can it be moved a little bit to create a bigger play space?

Marie: Lastly, we want to emphasize that you, the adults, may take on different roles to help infants and toddlers engage in play on their own and with each other. Adult support can look a variety of ways and it supports engagement and persistence. It can help complete play tasks or encourage social interaction and supporting verbal communication as well.

This doesn't always look like stepping in directly. I mean, it could look like stepping in directly, indirectly, or sometimes not at all. You might support engagement by modeling these types of things in your interactions with children to help them develop new skills. Often, just a little bit of guidance like a question, a hint, a prompt, or even just, you got this that'll be enough for a child to engage and play independently.

Let's move on to our next principle, multiple means of representation. This principle is all about flexibility in the way information is presented. Think about how each child you work with, how they receive and understand information. Everyone from infants through adults, we all vary in how we process and learn best from information, whether it's seeing it, hearing it, or touching it, or a mix of the three. We really want to provide children with a variety of ways to access information that enables them to fully engage and play.

Marie: Exactly, and this is just what we did with the I Spy game when we kind of brought in all these different aspects of how to play.

Beth: When possible, it can also be helpful to present different formats to children at the same time.

Marie: What might that look like?

Beth: Let's say that you're planning to sing The Wheels on the Bus in your learning space. This is great for your auditory learners. Well, you can also provide those corresponding motions for the different parts of the song, like the doors on the bus go open and shut for your visual learners.

Marie: What about the kids who are tactile learners?

Beth: You might provide a toy bus or a cutout and laminate different parts of the bus so children can explore them with their hands. Or children might even pretend to ride a bus like this child in the photo. With these options, children can engage in this playful learning experience at least three different ways.

Beth: Next we'd like to show you a short video clip of a teacher during outdoor play time with a group of toddlers. As you watch, think about how she's including the representation principle. How might she support infants and toddlers using the object in their exploration or during future free play?

Beth: Let's take a look.

[Video begins]

Teacher: You want a leaf? Feel that leaf. How does that feel?

Child: Aaah!

Teacher: Oh, you don't like the way it feels? Feel that leaf. They are pretty and green. You want a leaf? How does that feel?

[Video ends]

Marie: So cute. What did we see happen in this video?

Beth: Children are outside for free play, but the teacher is now, she's kind of guiding them a bit. She's encouraging children to touch a leaf, so this is becoming more guided play. She talks about their senses when she asks, how does it feel? That one little boy, he touches it, but he really does not like how that leaf felt. The teacher acknowledges his feelings, but then he runs away. What else could this teacher have tried to keep this little boy engaged?

Marie: This is where we want to think about expanding opportunities to engage the other senses. Maybe she could try giving him the choice to look at it or to smell it or to see if the leaf makes a sound. Or the teacher could maybe read a book about leaves or invite children to color a picture or draw the leaf that they saw outside.

Beth: These are all great suggestions for guiding play. We want to also think about extending this experience to open-ended play too. What could you do here? The teacher might add small

baskets or bins of leaves of different types to the shelves inside, so toddlers can access them inside too. Then they can choose, the toddlers can choose, how to use the leaves in their play.

Marie: But what about babies?

Beth: For babies, you could add safe, non-toxic leaves to a sensory table or even just give them a pile to play with. This is going to be a fun activity for toddlers too.

Marie: Those are great ideas. I want to play in a pile of leaves. We want to be flexible in the opportunities we provide for children during play.

Beth: Representation is all about how information is presented. It's important to provide representation in many different forms that meet the needs of children in your setting. This can help with communication during play too. Communication can occur through multiple means. Not only spoken or visual, but also non-verbal as well. This is true for children and adults. Let's think about babies. Their first play is often in their social interactions with us. They smile, they make a funny face, maybe they stick their tongue out, make some of those silly sounds, hoping that we will respond.

Marie: Our body language, our facial expressions, and eye gaze are all practices that you can incorporate working with children. Home visitors can help families identify non-verbal cues they already use and might want to try in the home. Maybe turning the lights on and off or using music or musical sound can be a way to begin transitions or to get everybody's attention.

Beth: I love this as a strategy for home visitors to share with families too. Help them find something playful, like a favorite song that their child will respond to.

Marie: Adding music and dimming the lights can be used beyond group settings as well.

Beth: If we're thinking about a daily schedule, you might add photos of children engaged in different activities and routines. You could also add a photo of each child to their cubby. Or for play tasks, you might follow Dawson's lead from the video. You could put outlines of the different materials on shelves to help toddlers learn where materials go as they learn to help clean up from their play.

Marie: You could consider including printed pictures or drawings and words together. You translate some of the words into languages that the children speak and then make the connection between the words, pictures, and drawings together. Like this photo on the right, the bins are labeled with photos of the toys found inside, along with the printed name in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic.

Beth: I love that. This could also mean learning some survival words yourself to help bridge that communication and access for children who are dual language learners. For home visitors, help families identify what communication tools would best fit their child's needs.

Marie: This also might look like learning American Sign Language signs and incorporating them into daily routines or into play. ASL provides access for everyone regardless of what language they speak. Another option is to adapt the picture exchange communication system or use augmented and alternative communication devices. Both pictures, both systems use pictures as a way for children to communicate their desires and needs. Through these types of systems, they can be used with all children to support engagement and participation.

Beth: For example, if you have a picture that depicts a crayon near the art area, a child who wants to color with a peer, they could pick up that photo and take the picture card and hand it to their peer to show that they'd like to color with them. This practice can be especially helpful for children who are dual language learners, children with disabilities, and even for children who tend to be shy. It's just a wonderful communication tool that supports peer play without needing to rely on spoken communication.

Marie: We linked these types of cards in the visuals and supports resource in your viewer's guide for you to use.

Beth: Our last principle today is multiple means of action and expression. This one is all about setting up a flexible learning space that supports children in expressing themselves in different ways.

Marie: Play is the way that children express themselves. But, as we talked about, play varies. Each child will engage and express themselves in different ways during play.

Beth: You might see children use toys in unexpected ways. For example, a child might bring blocks from the block area to the play kitchen to stir in a pot for some soup.

Marie: Some of you might think, but the blocks belong in the block area. But this brings us back to our assumptions and beliefs about play. We encourage you to have an open mindset. That play might look different than what you planned for or have previously experienced. That's okay.

Beth: During play, infants and toddlers are going to express themselves in different ways. Their play may be verbal or non-verbal. Some infants lay still or sit pretty still during play, while others, enthusiastically move their arms and kick their legs.

Marie: For toddlers, they might use pictures or signs to communicate or do so through their actions. They might express themselves through song or music, or be more physically active, or maybe they prefer quiet activities like chewing on toys, doing puzzles, or art. Most children use many of these approaches to express themselves.

Beth: One of the ways that you can support children's developing skills during play is to continue to model these different skills and let them practice it. This can be especially helpful for younger children who are still developing skills, or even children of different ability levels.

Marie: I want to tie this back into the expectations about what we have about what play should look like. We know, our expectations can have big impacts, especially for kids who have a disability or who are neurodiverse. For example, a toddler who twirls a leaf in their hand or waves a ribbon in front of them over and over may not seem like play, but it is indeed their way of playing and enjoying the motion or movement, or maybe just the time alone to be engaged without expectations. Observing what activities bring children joy and peace are important to recognize and support. That these types of play methods are valid and don't necessarily need to match their peers.

Beth: To further support children's play, adults can describe how they're playing sometimes. Through this engagement, you're not only making a connection with them, but also supporting their language development. One of the keys here is having various materials available so children have the opportunity to choose how to play based on their own abilities, interests, and strengths.

Marie: One baby might enjoy turning the pages while looking through a soft book, while another baby shows their interest by chewing on it. This is a totally okay way for babies to play.

Beth: In these images, we see two children playing with Play-Doh, but they're doing so in different ways. One is using their hands, and the other one doesn't feel quite so comfortable touching that Play-Doh, and so she's using a tool. There could even be that third child, who's more of an observer. They prefer to watch how others are interacting with materials before they're comfortable exploring themselves.

This could be due to their temperament or how they approach the world, or varying degrees of comfort with different types of sensory information. The important thing here is to keep offering options and to allow them that time to get comfortable. This could take days, it could take weeks, we just have to be patient. Remember that children express themselves through play to meet their own individual needs.

Marie: Open-ended materials are a wonderful way to let children choose how to express themselves and to explore materials during play. To do that, we're going to share another video clip from NCEC DTL's It's Time for Play video series. As you watch, think about other ways you can use open-ended materials to support infants and toddlers play. There's also space in your viewer's guide to jot down any notes.

[Video begins]

Children: It's time for play!

Amelia: Hi everyone, my name is Amelia and today we're going to talk about one of my favorite ways to play, make-believe. When we pretend, when we make-believe, we can go anywhere and we can be anything. That's why I'm sitting in front of this white wall. We don't need fancy toys or fancy props to go on marvelous adventures in our minds. That's particularly important when we're not able to go exactly where we want to go or do exactly what we want to do. This

is an experience that is so common for children. They're rarely able to do exactly what they want to do right when they want to do it. They play.

Children play to explore their world, to try things out. I'm sure all of us have seen children pretend to care for a baby doll or a teddy bear, maybe pretend to clean the house or even drive a car. They play this way because that's what they see important adults in their lives do. They play to try out roles, to figure out what that might be like or seem like.

Children, they're champions of play, but that doesn't mean that they don't need our support. As adults, we can play along with children and help them explore their ideas. It's important to follow a child's lead. Our role as adults is to support their ideas, their wonderings. We can ask questions, we can support what they're doing, what they're exploring, to help make that experience richer.

One way that I like to start a make-believe session is to find a common everyday object, like this paper towel tube, and think about all of the different creative things you could do with it. For example, this tube could be a telescope, or it could be a trumpet or it could be a fairy wand. There are so many different things that this paper towel tube could be.

You know what? Research says that children are often better at coming up with new and creative ways to use an object like a paper towel tube than adults are. You know what that means? It means that playing along with children and using your creativity to try and figure out where all the different things that you could possibly do with a paper towel tube are, that's good for your creativity too. It just might spark your next creative idea.

[Video ends]

Beth: I just love that video. One of the things that I want to highlight from it is really following children's leads and their interests, which make activities meaningful. Amelia used that paper towel roll, an object that many of us have around at home or in our learning space, and she used it as a telescope and gave us some other ideas for make-believe. Imagine all the different ways that a child might use a paper towel roll. Everything from art to drumsticks to a tunnel for cars.

Marie: With Amelia for inspiration, we want to dabble into make-believe with everyday objects for a minute. Look around your space and using only something in your room that's close, let's pretend for a minute. Select an item and reimagine a way to use it.

Beth: My pen might become a hairbrush for instance. We invite you to share what you found and how you're using it in the Q&A.

Marie: I found this little satchel and it could be like going on a little vacation, or if I open it up it could be a little hat.

Beth: My straw is a slithering snake. Let's see. We have people using pencils as oars to row a boat, or as a microphone, a bowl as a hat, and even their chair as a rocket ship. These are great. Keep them coming in.

Marie: Thanks for playing along. We love to see, ooh, computer snake, pretend snake, Kleenex, blanket for babies, so many things. We hope this provided a little bit of inspiration as you think about fostering inclusive play for infants and toddlers.

Beth: We want to spend our last little bit of time together here bringing these three UDL principles together to think more comprehensively about what it means for your learning environments. UDL is all about making sure your learning space works for everyone. For home visitors, help families adapt their space to best meet their child's needs. We want to create environments that embrace every learner's story.

Marie: This requires planning and taking the time to learn about children and their family's values, expectations, culture, and practices. You can find creative ways to integrate those pieces into the children's play environments.

Beth: For home visitors, help think with families about just small changes they can make, and they don't have to be permanent. It could be something as simple as using clear containers so a child can see what's inside to play with, or moving those toys to a lower shelf so they don't constantly have to ask their family to get something for them, and they can play more independently.

Marie: There are three components of a learning environment that we want you to consider. The physical, the social, and the temporal.

Beth: Let's start with the physical. This includes everything from furniture and the layout of the space, and outdoors too, not just indoors, to what's on the floor. Think background noise, the lighting, and how materials are stored and organized. Infants and toddlers should be able to safely access and fully participate in play in the learning space.

Marie: One fun way to do this is to take the child's experience. Get down on the floor and experience the space using your five senses the way an infant or toddlers do. You might lay on your tummy and crawl around, lay on your back like an infant does. What does the lighting feel like? What's up there? Can you see anything up there? For the crawling and mobile or walking infant, notice if there are safe places to pull themselves up or to safely climb. Home visitors can encourage families to do this in their home too.

Beth: We want you to put yourself in the child's shoes here and take their perspective. Think about mobile and non-mobile children sharing a space because we want to ensure that non-mobile children have protected areas to play.

Marie: In addition to physical mobility, we want to think about the auditory part of the environment. Imagine a child who's sensitive to loud noise or who is hard of hearing. When

there's too much background noise, it can be really hard for children to focus, or notice play cues from their peers or adults. All children should feel comfortable to play and explore in their environment.

Beth: We also want infants and toddlers and their families to see themselves in the learning space. One of the questions we encourage you to ask yourself is, can I see children in the space even when they're not there? In other words, are there materials and photos and books and music and languages that represent all the diverse cultural experiences that each child brings to the learning space?

Beth: We also need to think about the social environment, which we talked a little bit about before. The social environment focuses on interactions between children and their peers and adults, as well as relationships between education staff and the families. We know that relationships are at the heart of social and emotional development. When young children have a warm, trusting relationship with their caregivers, they develop the confidence to explore and play and form relationships with their peers. As we talked about earlier, learning from families not only helps us better support infants and toddlers, but also builds belonging with children and families.

Beth: As you consider the social environment, think about setting up opportunities for both independent plays, as well as parallel or play directly with peers, and observe children to figure out their play goals, and then find experiences that they enjoy to help keep them engaged. Remember that joining and play with peers, that can feel tricky to some children. You could also model inviting another child to play through your own words or actions. Remember, your supportive guidance can lead to more inclusive play environments.

Marie: The last component we want to mention is the temporal environment, and this refers to managing transitions and daily routines. One of the big considerations here is helping children move between play and other parts of their routine. Are there some ways that we can support infants and toddlers through transitions to and from play?

Beth: Visual schedules are a great way to show children what to expect before and after play, and as we talked about earlier, you can play music or even encourage movement to help make those transitions a little bit easier.

Marie: The music and movement and adding visual timers are helpful to show how much time they have left until they have to transition.

Beth: Managing the temporal environment, it's also about making sure that infants and toddlers have enough time to both follow and develop their interests while they play and remember that the amount of time that they're going to play is going to change and vary from infancy through toddlerhood as their awake times during the day increases.

Marie: We want to end today, thank you all for being here, by encouraging to think of your learning space as a whole. It should provide mirrors so children can feel they belong, see their

culture, family, and themselves, the materials, and activities, but it also should provide windows into the world so children can see the importance of celebrating diversity. They are exposed to difference, different people, places, cultures, communities they might not otherwise experience. I love this quote from NAEYC, “In diverse and inclusive learning communities, one child's mirrors are another child's windows, making for wonderful opportunities for collaborative learning.”

Beth: I love that quote too. As we leave you today, we just want to encourage you to think about one thing you would like to try or expand to support the play of the children that you serve. We'll have space for you in your viewer's guide as a reminder. Remember, when we foster inclusive play that meets the needs of all infants and toddlers, we're really building belonging in our learning spaces with the children and families that we work with.

Children and families feel that they belong when their individual differences are recognized, accepted, and supported. Remember, we cannot take a one-size-fits-all approach to supporting inclusive play. Flexibility will be your friend. Meet infants and toddlers where they are to create these spaces that build on their strengths that are accessible, culturally responsible, responsive, and meaningful to them.

Marie: Thank you so much for joining us today. This is our last Baby Talks of the year, and we will be back in 2024 with more research and practices to share.