Fostering Inclusive Play for All Preschoolers

Marie Baeta: To Front Porch. We're so happy to have you here with us today. Today, we're going to be talking about fostering inclusive play for all preschoolers. For those of you joining Front Porch for the first time, Front Porch is a series of webinars for teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors working with preschoolers in Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and American Indian and Alaska Native programs. These webinars are designed to introduce you to research about preschoolers.

My name is Marie Baeta. I will be your host today. I'm from I-LABS, the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington. I-LABS, an NCECDTL partner organization, is an interdisciplinary research center dedicated to understanding human learning with a focus on early learning and the brain. Today, we'll also be joined by our guest speaker, Virginia Tse, from Cultivate Learning, who's also a DTL partner based at the University of Washington.

Let's start off today's webinar by reviewing our learning objectives. First, we'll describe the features and practices of supporting inclusive play and how we can apply these inclusive practices to create engaging play for preschoolers. To aid you in today's talk, please reference the viewer's guide, which you can download from the resource list widget. The viewer's guide provides writing spaces for our presentation, as well as a great list of resources to continue your learning after today's webinar.

Before we jump into today's content, I wanted to define how we're going to be talking about play today. There are many different ways that educational staff and researchers define play, but for our session today, this is how we're going to think about it: that play is intrinsically motivating, that the child is engaged and wants to be playing, that it's pleasurable, it's enjoyable for them to do, that it requires active engagement, and that it's flexible and changing. Play can look different across cultures and communities and families, but play in all of these settings have these features in common.

Across all program settings, play and learning exist on a continuum. Free play is completely child directed, where they choose who, what, and where to play in effort to reach their own play goals. Adults have an influence on what materials are available, the physical layout of the space, which can affect play. But as far as active playing, the children are free to choose.

In collaborative play, sometimes called guided play, an adult joins the child's play as a support role but does not change the direction or flow of play. Play is motivated by the child's interest, and adults can build on the children's ideas or expand on their play. Guidance or scaffolding can range from minimal to intensive.

In an adult-directed play, adults plan and direct the play. The direction, flow, and goals of play are decided on by the adults. The goals are for the child to follow and be active participants. This can allow opportunities to learn specific skills or expand their understanding of specific information.

All three of these play contexts have benefits. There isn't one specific context that is better than the other. But the important takeaway here is that all three types of play contexts are valuable, and it's important for all preschoolers to experience every type.

What do we know about play? Play helps us be creative, adaptable, and flexible. It has huge impacts on children's well-being from motor development to improving mental health. The value of play is recognized to be so important that access to play is viewed as a human right by international organizations like the General Assembly of the United Nations. The American Academy of Pediatrics even advocates for pediatricians to write prescriptions for play to inform parents about the critical need of play and playful learning for young children. They also advocate for the protection of children's unstructured playtime, which was mentioned on the previous slide around free play.

We know that play is an important part of childhood that helps children learn and grow. 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.

Kids explore more and remember learning longer during play versus direct instruction. Play usually enhances curiosity, which facilitates memory and learning. Play also helps children deal with stress, like life transitions. Not only is it natural and necessary for children to play, but it also promotes brain development and the development of skills across the early learning outcomes framework or ELOF learning domains. Physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development are all essential ingredients of school readiness. More info on the ELOF and webinars about how play supports children's development are linked in your viewer's guide.

We know about the benefits and effects of play, but what does play look like for preschoolers? When I visualize what play looks like for these age groups, I just see lots of moving, lots of language, social interactions, and so much curiosity about the world. Their coordination is improving. They love to spin and jump and slide and go upstairs, challenge themselves physically. They're learning how to play cooperative games with rules. They're sharing experiences with each other. They're problem-solving during play. They'll often have really immersive, dramatic play with tons of imagination, all while increasing language, communication, and cognition.

We know that play is essential for children's learning and development, and all children need access to play. We're curious to lead a little short reflection for you all before we jump into today's content. In your experience – we're curious – what does inclusive play mean to you? Go ahead and put what your answer is into the Q&A box. Some things to think about is what does it look like? What does it feel like? We're super curious to hear what you all think, and I can read some of your answers in just a moment as they start popping up here.

I see someone mentioned that including all children, that they have access to materials, that it's engaging and playful. It's open-ended. Everyone's invited. Children with disabilities being invited to play. Everyone's enjoying themselves and engaging with each other. Yes, I think this all sounds super inclusive. Inclusive play is when we adapt activities so everyone, regardless of

ability, can participate. All levels, all abilities are able. Access to multisensory experiences. These are all super wonderful and I think really highlight a lot of the things we're going to talk about. You are all right on track.

Let's jump into today's content. How we're going to think about inclusive play is through three different categories. Inclusive play is culturally sustaining; that it is accessible, which many of you mentioned; and that it's meaningful. Although we're going to talk about each aspect individually, I want to make clear that these aspects are interrelated and support each other. That culturally sustaining play is meaningful and should be accessible. Accessible play is meaningful, etc. We're going to dive into each aspect and then emerge with practical steps for how to support inclusive play. Let's get started.

The first aspect of inclusive play we're going to talk about is play that is culturally sustaining. You might have heard of other ways of explaining similar approaches like culturally relevant or culturally responsive, but we've opted to use a newer idea that involves the idea that cultural knowledge and relevance is a good start. But to value and maintain children's cultural identity, we must perpetuate and foster and build on all of the knowledge that they bring.

Supporting culturally sustaining play means you understand children and their families' backgrounds and cultural heritage to create more equitable opportunities within learning in the play environment, that the children and their families' experiences are reflected in the learning environment. It means going beyond affirming and valuing children's culture to include actively working to develop children's culture and identity. This also includes language access for children who are dual language learners. It also means actively engaging and learning about a child's culture as an ongoing process that you learn something. You apply it. You might try something new and see how it goes, review it, and try again.

To learn more about what culturally sustaining play looks like and how to support it, we have Virginia Tse as a guest expert with us today. Welcome, Virginia. Please give us a little introduction.

Virginia Tse: Hi, Marie. Thank you so much for having me. My name is Virginia Tse. I am a content specialist from Cultivate Learning at the University of Washington, which as Marie mentioned is an NCECDTL partner organization. I was a former Head Start preschool teacher. This topic of play and culturally sustaining play is particularly exciting for me.

Marie: Really excited to have you here. I'm so excited to jump into what we have. Virginia and I thought it would be kind of fun to share some adorable preschool pictures of ourselves and talk a little about our experiences growing up and some similarities and some differences that we had between our cultural experiences. Virginia, why don't you tell us a little bit about your experience?

Virginia: Thanks, Marie. Growing up, I realized that I primarily played with my older sister and cousins because there weren't many children in my neighborhood. We did a lot of make-believe or pretend play that mimicked what we saw in our daily lives, both in our actual lives and what

we saw on television. Playing grocery store, playing house, cooking, dressing up in my mom's clothes. We would also play board games or go outside and make up games. As I reflected on my play, I realized that I generally played with children and I hardly ever played with my parents, maybe with the exception of some active play outside with my dad. What about you, Marie?

Marie: I grew up in a very big Italian Catholic family. This looked like a lot of big family gatherings. I had a ton of cousins growing up. Just like you, I had a lot of children to play with. I have two older siblings. I often was roped into their games as well. I remember being around a lot of cousins and, just like you, kind of replicating play that we saw in our daily lives. I was really into baby dolls when I was young and played with dolls till I was 12. I feel like there was like a lot of mirroring of what we saw in life.

I think it's interesting that our cultural backgrounds are different, but we have similar experiences where we didn't really play with adults a lot, but we did kind of have built-in sibling playmates as well. Thank you so much for sharing that piece of your history with us.

Virginia, how does culture show up in the play of preschoolers?

Virginia: That's a great question. Play is universal, but it looks different across cultures, as we kind of just talked about. For example, as we shared, there can be varying degrees of adult interactions. We both experienced a particular degree of adult interaction. In some cultures, caregivers play with their children, and in others, they don't. It can be confusing for some children in Head Start when an adult plays with them.

There can also be differences in the orientation of play. For example, play being individual versus collective-oriented or competitive versus cooperative. There can also be differences in play materials as well. For example, play can be with objects or toys, or it can be focused on playing socially. These are just a few examples of some of the variations in play that we might see in our programs.

Marie: I can't imagine having so many different children in one place that it's just so active and there must be a lot going on just in such a small space together. When we're thinking about the environment, what kinds of educational and social environments foster all types of play and include every child?

Virginia: In terms of the education environment, we as the educators decide or curate our environment, both the physical and social. That ultimately affects who gets to play. You mentioned this a little bit before, but for example, we decide what materials get put out and when, how to space specific interest areas, which areas get more space. This can send a message as to what type of play is encouraged and valued.

In terms of the social environment, there might be societal expectations or unconscious social values, beliefs, and stereotypes that can either support or hinder certain types of play or certain children from playing in a particular way.

One example of a societal expectation that can support play could be that if a child is raised in a family that values individualism, you can honor this child's play preference of individual play, which can help sustain their cultural values.

An example of unconscious bias in the social environment that can negatively affect play is actually a resource in your viewer's guide called Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys. It talks about how African American children are likely to spend less time in free choice and more time in teacher-directed activities. Another example of how it can negatively impact negative stereotypes is that children with disabilities have less autonomy in their choice of play. It's really important that we are noticing where these disparities are showing up in our programs and ensure that every child has access to different types of play so that all children are included.

Marie: Absolutely. I think it's really interesting how some of our values and biases can be some may be beneficial and some might discourage diverse play. What encourages or discourages children of diverse backgrounds to engage in play?

Virginia: I think how you set up the environment has a lot to do with encouragement and discouragement. What displays do you have, the foods that you have, the materials? Do they reflect their culture? How is the play space managed can also affect how kids play. If there isn't enough space or time … It's important also to have duplicates of materials that are really popular or limiting children in certain areas so that it's not overcrowded.

Marie: I like that you highlight foods and materials that are relevant to the children as well as quantities. I think this relates to meaningful play and also accessibility of play that we're going to touch on a little bit later. What do you think education staff need to know about supporting diverse cultural play in their settings?

Virginia: I think it's important to keep in mind that play looks different across cultures and families. It's important to get to know children individually.

Marie: That makes a lot of sense. Even if the children share a similar cultural background, to not treat them as the same and that each child will have their own particular ways of being.

I think it can sometimes be easy to make assumptions about children or families. How can education kind of check their biases and counter assumptions when observing or even intervening in play?

Virginia: It's a really good question. We all have different ideas and experiences of what play looks like, and that's OK. But it can be problematic if we let our own experiences affect how we define how children should play, what counts as play, and who should or can engage in certain types of play. We can check our biases by being observant and curious about our own perspective and checking ourselves and then making conscious adjustments if needed. Videotaping can be a very powerful way to reflect, individually or with a coach, about things that you might not see in the moment. For example, you could record a 10- to 20-minute video

of choice time and observe how you're engaging with children. Are you perhaps interacting more when children are engaged in a certain type of play? Are you discouraging certain kids from playing something? Those are really good, you know, self-reflection.

Marie: I love the idea of a video recording. I think you can learn so much when you're not focused on the moment but kind of see it from an outside perspective. What are some strategies education staff can use to ensure supporting diverse play?

Virginia: I think the first strategy is really to connect with families and learn about what play looks like in their home, and then intentionally creating environments that are reflective of what children are familiar with in their everyday lives. I remember one of my first programs, I wanted to make sure the dishes and the utensils and the dramatic play were familiar and kind of what the children had in their homes.

Another strategy is to stop and observe children to see what they're interested in and what kind of play they enjoy. Having informal conversations and playing with children is a really great strategy because that can give you a sense of their interests. Also, staying aware and curious about how you're interacting with different children and making conscious efforts to support different kinds of play.

Finally, for home visitors, it's important to be aware of what biases around play or about the play you might be bringing into your home visits. Really taking the time to observe and talk with your families about how they view play in their family, and then investigate how your own biases might be showing up.

Marie: Absolutely. These are all wonderful strategies that people can apply. A question I have is: how do you know when you're successful or unsuccessful?

Virginia: I love this question. I just feel like if you are hearing laughter, seeing smiles, and feeling joy from the children in your care, I would say you're pretty successful. For home visitors, if your engagement strategies align with the family's values surrounding play, this could look like the family is engaged and motivated to support play for their child, and their child is engaged with play tasks.

Marie: Absolutely. The joy can be contagious. That's a great thing to look for. Thinking about families and education staff and maybe home visitors, how can they be more effective liaisons between educational settings and the families?

Virginia: I think having conversations with families and sharing about what their child is experiencing in your setting is a great way to build connections between your program and families because when we're sharing stories of their children, it builds relationships and invites more conversation and opportunities to connect the different environments. Specifically for home visitors, you can invite parents to follow their child's lead and see where that takes them.

Marie: I think this makes a lot of sense. I can imagine that families are super eager to hear about their child's experience. Talking about those experiences together can help strengthen that home connection.

OK. Now, we thought it'd be fun to watch a short clip of a play situation that explores the culturally sustaining piece and explore the culturally sustaining pieces together. This is going to show an indoor activity of children dressing in regalia at the Cook Inlet Head Start Program and American Indian Alaskan Native Head Start Program. We're going to play that clip, and we're going to come back and talk about it.

[Video begins]

Teacher 1: You can wear a different one. OK, go get gummocks from over there. Take your boots off. OK? Alyssa? Alyssa, go take your shoes off. Yeah, you're going to take your boots off. OK, you like that one?

Child 1: Now what?

Teacher 1: OK, next you'll need a headdress and gummocks.

Child 2: Gummocks? What are those?

Teacher 1: Gummocks are like those in the boots.

[Video ends]

Marie: I love that video. Virginia, what do you notice happening in this video? What are you seeing?

Virginia: I saw lots of supportive social interactions, dressing up in regalia together, giving choices, incorporating their home language or their heritage language. I saw lots of children being involved, lots of excitement from the children.

Marie: Yes, absolutely. The children are totally engaged in the activity. They get to choose their outfits, try on different pieces of regalia. I appreciate that all the pieces are like all child size and that there's like a variety of choices for the children to choose from. It's very obvious that they're building, you know, their kind, caring relationships with the adult through their shared language.

A little past this clip, after this clip ends, actually, the children were saying, “Look at me! Look at me!” to their peers. That really supports the excitement and pride in wearing their regalia. What do you think? Can you think of any ways that the teachers might be able to increase the cultural relevance in this situation?

Marie: I think they could maybe add smaller versions of the regalia for dolls or having music available for children in the dramatic play area could help expand their play as it relates to their

culture. Maybe even having sewing or beading activity options for children to learn the skills of creating regalia could be fun. Then, inviting the children to share their experience with the regalia at home or encouraging a child to lead a song or dance that's meaningful or resonates with what they know … For family childcare providers with a mixed age group, this is particularly fun for older children to teach the younger ones.

Marie: Those all sound like so much fun. I want to try those activities too. We've reached the end of our section on culturally sustaining practice. Maybe we can hear from you. Let's wrap it up with some practices we can take away from this section.

Virginia: The first practice is getting to know children and families individually because every family is different. It's important to value their individual differences and strengths. Even if families are part of the same culture group, as you mentioned, their own individual expressions and values around culture and play can differ.

Their views can also change over time, so ongoing conversations are important. Another practice is offering diverse and relevant materials and building on children's interests and learning more about their family culture. If there's a special item from their home, you could find a copy and have it in your setting, like a photo or pillow or – for the setting I was in – like chopsticks. The children were really excited. They said, "I have these at home."

Another practice is to observe play. There's a good practice to see where kids are playing, what they're drawn to, who they're playing with. In center-based programs, making time to talk with your colleagues about your observations about play. They might have totally different perspectives that can expand the way that play is interpreted.

Another strategy is investigating your own feelings and biases towards different types of play – so taking time to make observations about when you intervene in a different play type and making time to talk these over with your colleagues – because naming it and discussing your observations with others can provide new insight into your behavior, which you must first acknowledge before we can change.

For instance, if I notice I'm feeling annoyed and anxious when I saw Sam dump the glue onto his project, and I jumped right in so it didn't turn into a huge mess – because in my personal life, I don't like messes or wasting resources. I felt compelled at that moment. Making this personal observation might lead to new ways of thinking. Maybe you need to use too much glue to know what the right amount is or maybe this child really likes messy play, and you can find other ways to support that. For home visitors, it's important to reflect on your own biases before commenting on a child's play. Think of it as an invitation to investigate the feelings that it brought up for you.

Finally, facilitating conversations about play with children and families. With children, talk about their play with them can provide you with details and knowledge that you can't just get from observing. What you observe through play might not be what they're thinking or hoping

for. Home visitors can talk with families and ask questions about how they view play for children and can also directly ask children about their play to find out more.

Marie: I love all of these strategies. Thank you so much for joining us for this portion. I really appreciate you lending your expertise. We will see you on the flip side.

OK, we are going to move to our next feature of inclusive play, which is accessible play. Access means that children have means of entry to a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environments. Access is one of the defining features of inclusive play, according to the National Association for the Education of Young Children. But there’s also a few different types of accessibility that we're going to talk about.

For one, is play physically accessible? Can children access equipment and material on their own with ease? Are materials organized clearly? Are physical spaces defined clearly? Are the walkways clear? Are there a variety of spaces for sensory exposure, like quiet spaces, loud spaces, social spaces, more solo spaces, and different types of lighting? Do all children have access to the same experiences, the outdoor experiences, the thrilling experiences, the messy play? Regardless of whether you have a child with a physical limitation, thinking about these types of questions can benefit all children.

If you do have a child with a physical limitation, it's important to consult with a disability services coordinator and families to create solutions to any physical access challenges they might experience in your program. As a home visitor, you can talk with families about material storage, space usage, and explore creative solutions for making areas their child can use and access with ease. You can even help families create temporary spaces for activities like block building or maybe spaces for quiet activities like resting in a blanket fort.

We're going to take a little activity break here, and we are going to look at this classroom and think about its physical accessibility. I want you to take a look for about 20 seconds. I'd like you to post some observations that you see around the physical accessibility of this place.

Remember, we're talking about access, materials, storage, walkways, and lighting. I'm curious to see what you all might see. It usually takes a minute to post in the chat. There's a lot of things happening in this classroom. It looks totally fun.

Somebody mentioned the tent might be an interesting temporary setup. That could be a solo time inside the tent, maybe temporary structures. There're some concerns about maybe there's too many things on the floor. If someone uses a wheelchair, that might be difficult. Looks like people are mentioning the creative art. It looks like there might be a couch in the art area, kind of unsure what that area might be. Somebody mentioned it's small, but it will depend on the number of kids, and I think that's totally spot on.

We don't really know this classroom, you know, or the children who inhabit the space. Someone noticed low open shelves, maybe moving the tent to a wider space. Maybe the tent creates a cozy corner. I think you're all making really great observations for this space. I noticed,

just like you saw, that there's materials low. There looks to be some labels. There's comfy seating. There're carpeted, uncarpeted areas. It looks like they've taken advantage of some of the ceiling space too. On the right, you can see some things hanging down.

When I think about this space and what we might be able to modify, maybe you add some words with labels to the block area or some of the dress-up area or the art section as well. Maybe we could include a different type of lighting. I see overhead lighting. Maybe we can throw in a lamp to a corner and just create different lighting areas.

Like one of you suggested, you can move the tent to a more open space. Maybe that'll be a less social and more solo space as well. There's lots of things that we can think about in the classroom and the physical accessibility. Good looking out for that.

The next type of accessible play we're going to think about is socially accessible play. Inclusive play means that children have access to social opportunities. This includes nurturing, caring interactions from adults and opportunities to interact and build relationships with peers.

Education staff and group care settings serve a relational role model for children. Children learn through watching and observing. Modeling kind interactions, providing invitations to join play, and answering questions from peers with kindness are great ways to build empathy, understanding, and community. You can use small group activities as part of guided play to help promote social skills, and small groups are great for dual language learners as well.

Using prompting, praise, and specific ways for peers to include others promotes fairness and equity in play situations. Heightened peer acceptance in the early learning years can be the strongest predictor of quality of life in the adult years. These important skills that education staff can support the development of children with disabilities, including building emotional literacy, emotional regulation, and friendship skills, as well as problem-solving.

A great resource to learn more about strategies for supporting social-emotional learning for children with disabilities is a webinar available to you on ECLKC located in their viewer's guide called Supporting Social and Emotional Learning for Children with Disabilities.

Home visitors can also support social-emotional learning for children and families they serve by learning strategies like through the webinar I mentioned or promoting peer group opportunities during group socializations. Group socialization activities can focus on a specific skill, social-emotional language development to support school readiness. Home visitors can also encourage parents to observe and participate. It's a really great opportunity for children and their families, and you can learn more in our research section in your viewer's guide.

Another type of accessibility we're going to talk about is cognitive accessibility. This looks like having multiple ways for children to engage with a topic or play theme as well as the tools to help them access that information. Having visual, tactile, and physical elements embedded into a group story time is a good example. Having puppets or physical motions to engage children during story time is a good way to involve multiple senses.

Sometimes, a child with a disability will use a picture exchange communication system, like the one shown here on the right. It consists of relevant words that a child can either point to, move to a board, or give to a caretaker to communicate their needs or to communicate with peers. This is an example of providing more cognitive access to communication and peer relationships.

Children with and without disabilities can benefit from expanding access to understanding. Depending on the child's needs and strengths, you might include a physical object, a photograph, an auditory cue, or a physical movement for supporting a behavior, a communication, or a participation. These are just a start to expanding the ways that children have access to their environment, to understand, and communicate with peers and adults.

You can find resources for visual printouts to use in our resource section in your viewer's guide. Observing what skills children are working on and providing opportunities for them to expand on their play is a strategy you can use as well. For example, once a child has mastered a five-piece puzzle, can you add a puzzle with more pieces? Maybe they can assist a friend who's working on that puzzle and do a little bit of turn-taking as well. Applying changes to play environments will benefit everyone's access, though it's important to remember that this is a secondary benefit.

Supporting the child with a disability is still a practice of equity, even if it doesn't benefit other children. If you do have children with disabilities or suspected delays in your setting, it's important that you create informed changes in the environment by consulting with the disability services coordinator and families as part of the coordinated approach to the full and effective participation of all children with disabilities to create impactful and sustainable changes that improve their access. This can help to ensure that we're not making assumptions about a child's ability or interest and that we can gain perspectives and insights from the people who worked and interact directly with the child.

You can learn more about the coordinated approach by viewing the webinar, Coordinated Approaches: Serving Children with Disabilities. Again, the link is in your viewer's guide.

One topic that continuously popped up as I was doing research around accessible play was about risky play. There are many resources and webinars about this topic: the risks versus hazards, and how to set up risky play. I wanted to specifically talk about risky play and access for kids with disabilities.

You may already know, but risky play, like experimenting with speed, with heights and climbing, and rough and tumble play, is a necessary developmental skill for all children. Risk-taking in play is fundamental to children's exploration and understanding of the world. In risky play, children will play at their limit of their challenge, and it helps them to learn their own limits and to find out what they can and cannot do yet.

Access to regular risky play can actually reduce children's likelihood of getting injured. Children who take risks in play are often more physically active, and it helps develop their social, emotional, and communication skills, as well as gain experience with autonomy and resilience.

We know that risky play is beneficial for all children, but what about children with disabilities? Well, cooperative forms of risky play, like rough-and-tumble play, provides children with disabilities opportunities to practice those really important social skills like giving and receiving social cues, understanding facial expressions and body language during play. Risky play allows children with disabilities to make decisions in low-impact scenarios and to practice autonomy, a practice that is often denied to children with disabilities.

What does risky play look like for children with disabilities? It depends on the child and their interests, their abilities, and their strengths, right? Each child is different, so creating individualized opportunities is key. For example, a child who uses a walker or a wheelchair, maybe even providing different materials to roll over, could provide a sense of thrill as they try to maneuver over them. Or even touching an unpreferred texture can be considered risky for some children, so it really depends on the child's ability and interest.

Children with disabilities really benefit from risky play as well, but do they have regular access to risky play? Research shows that children with disabilities have far less opportunity and support for engaging in risky play. Even if the physical environment is accessible, the social environment can often be the biggest barrier, typically from the adults in the educational environment.

In a research study done in 2021, researchers were examining how staff culture, like beliefs and values, influenced a play intervention for children with disabilities. The play intervention intended to shift adult attitudes around risky play in two different school programs for children with disabilities. This included workshops for the adults to discuss the benefits and challenges of risky play, as well as a child-centered intervention, adding loose parts play and materials to encourage cooperative, active, and risky play. They found that the educators' values and ideas of play around risk and disability influenced the way and to the extent that staff were willing to let go and allow children to engage in risky play.

Adult beliefs about the purpose of play and recess, as well as their expectations for children with disabilities, particularly influenced the intervention. Adults have a direct impact on the opportunity for children to participate in risky play, but especially for kids with disabilities.

Generally, the control of risky play is often due to fear, which is understandable – the fear of child injuries or maybe being sued. Although these situations can arise, if the environment is set up correctly, it shouldn't happen often. Making decisions about a child's ability or interest, they can arise. But I think sharing information about the benefits of risky play with the staff and supervisors and families, along with planning for risky play and the mediation of hazards, can help reduce or avoid these extreme situations.

Adults may have their own impressions of what a child with a disability is capable of doing. They might be overprotective and make decisions about a child's ability or interest before they're even able to try. Our biases can be a barrier to a fair opportunity.

A study that looked at parental attitudes towards risky play for their children with disabilities found that the parents were less tolerant of risk-taking in play than for parents with typically developing children. This emphasizes the need to talk with families about the benefits of risky play for children with disabilities, as well as talking with families to explore their own boundaries and values around risky play for their child.

What can you do to support risky play for children with disabilities? Just as you would support risky play for all children, it's important to regularly check and remove hazards from the play area. This includes obvious dangers like sharp objects, broken pieces of equipment, and then also ensuring that there are different choices and levels of risky play that children can engage in.

Secondly, actually adding in loose-parts play can enhance risky and social play opportunities, especially for kids with disabilities. Loose parts play and its open-ended opportunity encourages more active and creative ways to play, like maybe a bed sheet for a fort or a rope for pulling toys from a walker.

As we talked about a little bit, social boundaries are often more prohibitive than physical ones, so it's important to explore your own biases around disability and risky play and how that might influence the opportunities for children in your setting. It can be useful to explore your own individual values around play and discussing as a team with your colleagues as well.

Creating individualized opportunities for children with disabilities is very important. Even if the two kids have the same disability, they will be affected by it differently and require intentional approaches. If a child has an IEP, an Individualized Education Plan, you can consult with the team to discuss how risky play could support the child's individual goals.

Again, with the coordinated approach, you consult with the families and involve professionals to advocate for risky play opportunities as well as create risky play situations. This includes reviewing how a change went and modifying the challenge as needed. Being proactive about starting conversations with family about why your program supports risky play and discussing their worries or fears can help create understanding and support for risky play.

Also included in your viewer's guide is a play space assessment that can help you think through your play space and ensure opportunities for risky play.

Access to risky play is one component of making play accessible. Let's bring this back together into the bigger picture of strategies that enable accessible play. Observing the interactions between children and physical space, just like Virginia mentioned, lots of observing. But this includes both indoor and outdoor space as well. Are there clear and open spaces, clear pathways to move in, spaces to work, places for works in progress maybe, adding in loose parts, organizing materials, thinking about a mixture of sensory spaces? Are there spots where they are struggling to access? What does it look like they want to do?

A second part to the first part is also, it's important to ask the children directly about what they want to play with, what they wish they had, and what they want to do. This also supports their own autonomy and self-advocacy as well. For the second bullet point is to create multiple ways to engage. Do they have options for how to participate? Think through the senses. Are there ways to see and touch and hear information?

Adults are less likely to intervene during free play, but often this unstructured time is the most isolating for children with disabilities. It's important to recognize your role in facilitating and supporting play situation between peers, including free play.

Creating small inclusion groups with a peer or two with a child who has a disability to work on specific play skills, like turn-taking or asking peers to play, is a great way to support learning skills through play and also are very supportive situations for children who are dual language learners.

Modeling those warm, curious interactions and scaffolding peer engagements and giving the words for invitations or explanations ... Like for example, “Oh, Mario's looking at you now. You can ask Mario, ‘Mario, let's play.’” Or you notice that Sarah moves her hands when she's really excited. Making those kinds of sweet observations can help make those connections between peers. Consulting with families and the disability services coordinator and involved professionals can help create an intentional and individualized approach for the child.

Home visitors can gain unique insights into family's beliefs and values can be a great role model as well as thinking partners when creating new ways to make play accessible for their child. We're going to watch a short video of children playing outside and I invite you to observe what's happening, what dynamics might be at play, and how we could support accessible play for this child. All right.

[Video begins]

Teacher 1: Itsel, you’re being a very good friend to your friend Ethan. Nice work together.

Ethan: Wahoo!

Teacher 1: What do we have here?

Itsel: Ethan, stand up. Stand up, Ethan. Stand up! Stand up! Ethan. Ethan, stand up. Stand up, Ethan.

[Video ends]

Marie: I think that's a very sweet video. We can see Ethan and his friend, his peer, supporting him and encouraging him with his walker. He's outside playing with his peers. We see some verbal and nonverbal communication. For instance, Ethan sits down and looks around, which can mean maybe I need a break. He looks behind him to see what else is going on.

There's a lot of nonverbal information that we can see from this situation and that their peer is building that connection with their friend. Like I mentioned before, children with disabilities often have less autonomy in play. I wonder if he is enjoying the connection, or maybe he would like to have more choice in how or when or where he's walking, or maybe it's a mixture of both. Again, because we don't know this child individually, it's hard to make assumptions.

When we think about how to make this play more accessible, I wonder if the teachers might be able to check in with Ethan and see where he wants to go. Maybe taking his walker. I saw some colored steps behind them. You could find some shorter ones that he wants to try to walk over. You could lay down bubble wrap and see if he wants to push his walker over bubble wrap or maybe attaching a basket to his walker to carry around some props or balls.

These are just a few ideas kind of based on the video and thinking about how to make accessible play and really tuning into those nonverbal communications. I saw on his walker that there were communication cards, which is wonderful – another way to make it more cognitively accessible for social participation. There's always fun things that you can expand and try as well.

The third aspect of inclusive play is that play is meaningful. This essentially means that play has value to children and that it's relevant to their lives. Meaningful play can look like children being deeply engaged in their play. They might seek additional materials to bring into their play and expand on their play. It builds on their interests, their knowledge, and experiences. For example, a child might want to play hair salon if they recently went with their mom to get their hair braided. Or maybe these families fish on the weekend, and this is a very engaging activity for them to do.

If they're very engaged, they might continue their play saga over a few days. Sometimes it can be hard to redirect them out of their play. That's when you know they're really engaged and deeply engrossed. This can also look really different between children too. They might be deeply engaged in playing solo or with a friend or a small group. They also might talk about their play after they move on to another activity. That's when you know that something is really stuck with them.

If you want to learn more about meaningful play, a great way to do this, like we've talked about in our other section, is observe and then talk directly with the children in your setting. Observation is a great tool to use when wanting to learn more about children's play, just like Virginia mentioned earlier.

You probably already do this to some extent, but adding in some intentionality to interpreting what you're seeing can increase your understanding. What are the least and most popular areas? When are they engaged? When aren't they engaged? What are the important themes that are coming up for them? Just like they're going to be replaying scenes in their life that they've experienced as well.

The next step can be talking with the experts themselves. Facilitating discussions around play is a fun, informative, and community-building activity. There's many different approaches you can use. You can record short videos, take photos, write down quotes that you hear during play, or even having the children draw out their play scenarios are great ways to focus on the topic together. Asking open-ended questions can help facilitate their thinking and reflection as well. Ask about their feelings and their ideas.

These are conversations that can happen during home visits and group socializations between you and the family members and the child too. What do they notice about their child's play at home? What do they notice during group socializations? You could say, "I noticed you brought blankets into the boat. What's your plan for that?" Asking these kinds of questions can help uncover their goals, review their problem-solving skills, support language and communication skills, and also just instill a sense of pride related to play that it's taken seriously and that people care about their experiences. Hearing more about their ideas and internalized storylines can help you collect ideas for extending and adding complexity to their play as well, which we're going to talk about next.

Once we gather these observations and insights into the motivations and goals of the children, another tool we can use is a planning web. This is a useful tool for center-based programs and for home visitors to use collaboratively with families to expand on play themes. This is essentially the idea of brain mapping, where you put a central idea in the middle and branch off with related ideas. For example, say we have this child in our program. This is Max. Through observation and talking with Max, we learn that he loves to sort and line up the animals on block structures that he creates. This building and interaction is also woven into a narrative about animals at the zoo.

Starting with what we know, we can jump off into the land of imagination and think of some indirect and direct ways to support Max's play. What we know about Max … He sorts animals. He mixes it with block play. We know he speaks Spanish at home. A lot of what he talks about relates to zoos. We could add in and create habitat boxes with Spanish and English labels that could provide an informative and new way to sort animals that supports his dual language learning. We could add zoo-related props to expand and deepen his zoo narratives. We could combine … Incorporating bilingual books about the animals represented can give Max new information about the animals he sees and support his language development, as well as expand his knowledge on a new sensory experience that could open up new avenues for play …

You can always try one and see what happens and continue to use the planning web as play is always evolving. Home visitors can use materials and items found in the home and encourage families to think of play extensions using those materials. We can wrap up our meaningful play with some strategies. We always talk about observing their play. What do you notice? Where does it take them? What themes do you notice? What themes are they working through?

Offering inviting and diverse materials provides children with opportunities to experience new things. For instance, how would a basket of flashlights influence play, or maybe colored glasses? Throwing something in there and seeing what happens. Having materials that reflect their

everyday lives, like Virginia mentioned – the plates and cups and chopsticks that are familiar to them. Off course, talking with families will give you more information about what they do. Maybe they love to jump rope with cousins or fish on the weekends. Discussing play directly with children will provide you with valuable insights into their goals and motivations. That can help you expand on their play as well.

We're going to look at another video together about meaningful play. There is room on your viewer's guide to fill this out as well. For this video, we're going to focus on a planning web for Luke, the boy in the blue shirt. Let's jump into our video and look out for Luke in the blue shirt.

[Video begins]

Child 1: Soccer, Luke. Soccer. Soccer. Soccer, Luke.

Teacher 1: Nice, Luke.

[Video ends]

Marie: Such a fun video. Now that we've seen the video, let's get to work on our web. We're going to make some quick observations about Luke and what we see in this video. Observations that we can maybe put in the center is that there's lots of peer communication, his friend invites him in, he joins in the play, he loves playing soccer with his friends. There's lots of turn taking. If we start there, we want to think about ways that we could expand on this type of play and support this peer play and meaningful play for Luke.

I want you to think about something, how we could expand on making this more meaningful for him. Go ahead and write some responses in the Q&A box again. It always takes a minute for that to show up. I know we have some very creative minds out there that love thinking about play.

I'm going to read off … Somebody noticed the drumming that happened in the beginning. Maybe there's a way to incorporate more drumming or drumming in soccer. Who knows? There could be creative ways to do that as well. I'll read off some ideas that I have. Once I see some more responses popping up, then we can add those in as well.

I thought of moving the ball storage to the soccer area so the options are very clear and provide visual options for going and grabbing and maybe a nonverbal or verbal action to invite so Luke can invite his friend as well. Maybe adding visual prompts like pictures or phrases that Luke can initiate for himself or giving it to his friends. I thought of maybe hanging bells from the net to create a sensory experience, and it really heightened the excitement of making a goal as well. Again, here's that loose parts play – maybe providing a stack of orange cones or other loose parts like chalk to see how they might integrate that into their play.

I see people saying maybe put a bell inside the ball to help him find the ball by sound. That sounds really fun. Exploring other types of balls. Maybe there's a more bouncy one, like a four-square ball or a soccer ball or a small ball or a bigger one. I see someone mentioning adult

engagement. Maybe the educator could come closer and really encourage those peer interactions. These are all fun choices and I love using this planning web. Thank you for sharing your ideas.

Inclusive play, as we're kind of wrapping up today's training … Inclusive play is an equity practice. The National Association for the Education of Young Children defines early childhood inclusion as practices that ensure every child, regardless of ability, can participate in a wide range of activities and contacts as full members of families and communities. Three ways that we covered today in which you can build inclusive environments include ways to support culturally sustaining, accessible, and meaningful play.

We hope today's webinar provided you with insights, information, and strategies to apply to your own work. Be sure to check out the viewer's guide for additional resources related to this topic. Thank you again to Virginia Tse for joining us today. It's a super treat to have you. This was our last Front Porch of 2023. We hope to see you again in 2024 for exciting new Front Porch webinars. Thank you for joining and have a great day.