

Transcript Episode 21: Prioritizing Play for Kids

Introduction:

You are listening to the UnDeniably Well podcast hosted by the University of Delaware's Employee Health and Wellbeing team. Keep listening to discover ways to be your best self each and every day.

On this episode of UnDeniably Well, we will be talking about ways to keep our kids engaged and learning through play over the summer months. I'm joined by three employees from New Directions Early Head Start here at the University of Delaware, who share their expertise, their favorite activities, and discuss why play is so important to development and growth of a child.

Ryan Shuler:

Hello, I'm Ryan Shuler from the University of Delaware's Employee Health and Wellbeing team. On this episode of UnDeniably Well, we will be talking about things we can do with our kids on summer break. Today I am joined by UD employees from New Directions Early Head Start. I'm joined by Anmarie Stiller. She's in Head Start, Kent County. Esther Lauser is a family service worker at the Neighborhood House Early Learning Center in Wilmington. And Lori Keller is a home visitor from the University New Direction Early Head Start. So I feel, I will say, selfishly, very excited to have this conversation because I have a two year old and a three year old at home who are, it's only July 7th today, and I feel like I'm already running out of things to do with them. So I'm very excited to talk to these three ladies about what we can do. Lori, I would like to start with you. I keep seeing on social media, there's a couple accounts that I follow that talk about open ended versus closed toys. Can you explain what that means and sort of the types of toys that parents should be looking for to get that greater engagement from their kids?

Lori Keller:

So one thing to think about, what I always like to share with the parent is the more the toy does, the less the child does. And so if you're looking for toys that your child can really learn from and use in a number of ways and develop a number of learning skills, there's a trend that's been a trend for a while, but it's called open ended toys, and it's toys that can be used for a number of purposes. It could be blocks. It could be recycled materials. One thing that I use in home visits is shower curtain rings, and it's just the basket of circles of different size circles. And it's amazing when I see this just one activity, what children can create from just a basket of circles or just blocks or recycled cups, stacking recycled cups and things like that.

Ryan Shuler:

It's interesting that you say that Lori, my friends and I always joke that, you know, I have a whole playroom full of toys with my kids, but all they wanna play with is pots and pans. And they pull out my recycling container, like full of cups or bottles. That's what they want. They don't want all of these like fancy toys that are really pushed on us. So it's very interesting to hear that.

Lori Keller:

That is interesting that you say you were recycled materials or the bottles and containers, because that's actually an activity that we present to children. We just take a variety of containers, twist on lids, pop on lids, hinged, open lids, and it's amazing to see a young child explore and fit the pieces together. Put the

lids back on, figure out how to open the lids, things like that. So it's not unusual, but they're learning a lot.

Ryan Shuler:

And that's, that's I guess a question that I, I would open to Anmarie or Esther is what level of play is learning, because I think as parents we're so, it's so pushed on us of like kindergarten readiness, and they need to know their ABCs, and they need to know all of these things. And I think that it becomes very stressful to a parent of like, what do I do to ensure that that's happening? Anmarie, could you speak to that at all? Sort of like that, that kindergarten readiness and what role does just general play, play in learning?

Anmarie Stiller:

The play in learning is so important. Lori was saying, you get so much out of it by like stacking those cups. You're counting them as you're stacking them. You're talking about the different shapes because now solo cups have like the square shape at the bottom. So you can talk about how they're square at the bottom circle at the top, you can match their colors. Play, learning through play is so valuable because you're not saying sit down and we're going to learn to count today, and we're going to count the spoons 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and then we're going to take two away. Where if you're playing and making it fun, they're not realizing it's happening and they're actually engaging and soaking it all in.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah. And I think for. I think for me really after I had my first child, that was sort of like a big learning curve. And I think a big learning curve for me and maybe Esther, you can sort of speak to this is when, as a parent, when do I engage with the play and when do I just let them play? Like at what point do they just play and use their imagination and run with it themselves? Versus when do I step in to try to quote unquote, teach them something? Esther, can you speak to that?

Esther Lauser:

Yeah, but first I'm going to say all play is learning. The second children open their eyes, they're learning. So it's not something they have to kind of consciously think about and do, I guess as, and it depends on sort of what the parents' focus is, but you're going to follow their lead, as long as they're doing something that's safe and within the limits of what your rules are at your house. Some parents don't mind messes. Other parents, they have to change their child's clothes every time they get a drip on them. And children are going to almost invariably want to rope you in to whatever it is they're doing and tell you that they want you to participate.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah.

Lori Keller:

Say your children were engaging in playing restaurant of some type and they were assigning roles and having discussion and engaging in this play. And if you decide, oh, I have a few minutes, I'd really like to teach them something, you can step in and maybe be the customer and say, I would like one slice of pizza or two slices of pizza. Maybe encourage them to write down your order. Maybe help them make

signs for their restaurant. So they're going to learn by playing what they're already playing, but as you, as a parent, if you had in mind that you wanted to help them learn their numbers or learn to count or learn, you know, environmental, language and help them write up a menu for their pizza shop or signs for their pizza shop or restaurant, whatever it was. So there, there helps you keep a balance too, because they are learning a lot by that independent play.

Ryan Shuler:

That's a great point. I think again, for me personally, it was very interesting to see the dynamic of one child who was starting to engage with independent play versus adding a second child and how much that changes the dynamic of, of everything. , Anne Marie, do you have any sort of tips or thoughts or suggestions for parents who have multiple kids and, and just anything around this play in learning?

Anmarie Stiller:

I think it's tough. I give lots of parents credit. I did a visit today, and I had a two-and-a-half-year-old and a seven-year-old. And then we had a 13-year-old in the visit and there's different ages going all around and somehow or another, it all worked out. They all sat. And they worked with the child that I was working with, and we were playing cars and making ramps.

And, you know, the 13 year old was up higher stacking and letting them roll down and it worked and it, but it can, it doesn't always go that beautifully. , and I think you have to go with what your child is interested in at that moment and further expand on it. So if you guys are sitting there and you're doing cars and things are working well, and your 13 year old is making these really cool ramps and then the seven year old comes in and decides they're gonna be monsters and step on it. Well, then we're gonna have to learn how to play monster play and incorporate that in. So that way, the two-year-old isn't upset that things are getting crushed and ruined. We have to make it sound like it's fun and be like, oh, the monster came and crushed the mountain and we're gonna rebuild over here and make a new city.

And you kind of go with each of the child's and their leads and follow them, and I think you have to set up those boundaries too, because you don't want it to get out of hand or out of control. But with multiple children in the house, the 13-year-old or 12-year-old or whatever can engage with those two and three and four-year olds to help also with those plays.

Ryan Shuler:

Do you have any tips or suggestions of how to get the older children involved in that? You know, we were talking about this earlier that sometimes these 13-year olds think they're too cool, and they don't want to play Paw Patrol with their little brother or sister. Do you, have you seen, or any tactics that have worked well to get them involved?

Anmarie Stiller:

Sometimes they just engage on their own, and that's what you wanna hope for. Sometimes when I go into the home, I'll yell for them. I'll be like, Hey, come down. I'm here. Let's, I'll get, especially during the summer months, you've got everybody coming in and out of the homes and you know, I'm like, come on, who's all home, let's all play with our, you know, the child that I have with us, you know, let's make this fun and I show everything I got. I take it out of my bag. You know, sometimes it's called the Mary Poppin bag because everything just keeps coming out of the Mary Poppins bag. Sometimes it just

happens naturally. Sometimes you're pulling teeth. Other times the older group just wants to go and be left, and if they're safe and doing safe things, that's fine. I think you really just got to let it kind of happen and not be forceful with it.

Ryan Shuler:

That's a good reminder. Yeah, Lori

Lori Keller:

These older children can, sometimes we look at them and they, they appear to be older, but they're still children. And so, commenting on that good behavior and saying, oh, thank you for teaching him that, or look how he's responding to you. He really likes his time with you, referring to the younger brother. So really build up, you know that relationship with that older child so that they too can recognize, oh, this child does have fun with me, and I am teaching them something. So it does help to recognize them. Also it's helps to maybe set a time limit. You know, your little brother or sister really wants to play with you.

Do you think that we could set a timer for both of you and, and say for 15 minutes, can you engage in throwing a ball with him? Or can you build a tower of these cups, these wonderful cups that are so fun to build a tower with, and can you build a tower so that your brother can throw the ball and knock it down? So that those kind of a more advanced activity for the older one to help with the younger one, but always acknowledge that that child really enjoys his time with you, so that they can help to recognize that.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah.

Esther Lauser:

A lot of what they're talking about, without talking about it, though, is those social interactions that are happening, that when we talk about learning, we're focused on counting or motor skills, whether they're balancing something or fitting this puzzle piece in. But sometimes the only thing they're learning maybe is taking turns or how to be patient, or you are reinforcing the idea that as a three-year-old, it really is okay to want to sit at the table where you're one year old is not knocking down your activity over and over, and that you can give them the language and the opportunity to kind of put that out there.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah, I just real quick, Anmarie, before I go to you, I actually was going to speak on this and that's a great segue. That is why we are having this group. And I mean, you know, talking about early childhood with children may not make the most sense at the first glance to an employee wellbeing podcast, but these same skills that we are trying to teach our children, are skills that will carry with them throughout their life. So I'm thinking, what do I, what does my child need to be set up for success? So when they go to college, so when they're an employee, so when they're working, they've learned these positive communication skills. They've learned positive reinforcement. They've learned how to acknowledge their coworkers success without being upset.

And all of it really starts really at this young age. And I think sometimes it can feel like a lot of pressure on parents to make sure you're doing that right. But Lori, like the examples you gave are so easy, just

point out the obvious, your little brother really loves playing with you. That same skill can carry on as an employee to say, Anmarie, you did a great job in that presentation. It's the same basic skill that we can kind of carry throughout our life. So Esther, thank you for bringing that up because it really does sort of tie together why all of, you know, early childhood play stuff really does have implications sort of on the employee wellbeing side as well. Anmarie, did you have a thought?

Anmarie Stiller:

I did. And I just wanted to kind of contribute to what Lori, and kind of add on to what Elster was saying. Some of the tips you can do, you can make like poster boards to encourage like multiple family activities throughout the house, encourage play. So you could do like. If 15 minutes of cooperative play works, you could do screen time for five minutes or the Wi-Fi password will come back to you, you know, encourage things throughout the household. So that way everybody's engaged. Another thing is, encourage them to do chores with you. That's a huge open-ended activity too. A three-year-old can sweep. It may not be swept the way you want your floor swept, but they can help. And they're learning responsibility and action. You know, if I sweep this, my house is going to be clean and things are going to be put away. And when I get older, I'm going to need to learn to do that.

Fill up a sink with dishes. Two-year olds love and three-year olds love to play with soap and water and sponges. Give 'em the big bowl, let them mix with it and wash it and dry it and learn to put it away. Those are huge responsibilities. So chore charts, family time charts are important. We do things with our families where we make those canning jars with Popsicle sticks and we put different rewards on there that are all free that you have to have throughout your house. So whether it be taking a nature walk or make a movie night or out in the backyard, scavenger hunts. They can pick those on, let's say a Saturday night to create more family time and involvement, and it also helps get everybody in the family involved.

Ryan Shuler:

I love that idea so much. I think that right now, and I'm really appreciating everything that the three of you are bringing because I feel like there is so much pressure. I feel like social media has made this so much worse to be like the coolest parents or fun, or always going to an amusement park or somewhere.

One, some people just don't have budget for that. And two, some people don't enjoy those things, but it makes you feel like you are less than because you're not doing those things with your kids. So to hear from a true child development perspective, that those things don't matter as much as spending quality time, is really validating and reassuring, I think, that this can be done well without needing this extravagant, you know, parenting style. Yeah. Esther.

Esther Lauser:

Yeah, you hit on the magic word. That's exactly what children want. They want your time, and they want your attention. It's not that they dislike going to an amusement park or doing some pricey thing. But that's honestly, what's most valuable to them. And sometimes we lose sight of that in that kind of competition or the race to be like your neighbor, who has their kids in camp all summer, or runs her own camp for all seven of her kids or some other kind of crazy comparison that we do.

And that interest too, that was one thing they were both talking about, the whole idea of why the little one wants to do what the older one is doing. Why do you think they're repeatedly knocking down your

your blocks? Why do you think he wants to do what you're doing? And the chores, the imitation, the wanting to do what other people are doing? Their older siblings aren't running around with toys. They're doing big, important things. And the more that you could involve them in those things, the more happy they'll be.

Ryan Shuler:

I have a question about, like nature and what role, nature and outdoor plays in all of this. I've seen sort of this shift in like tinker garden instead of kindergarten where it's more, you know, nature-based curriculums. Are there benefits to kids being outside on a more regular basis? And if so, are there, you know, more simple activities that parents can sort of set up or engage with their child in the outdoor space?

Lori Keller:

There's a lot of, a lot of new research. And like you said, there are the tinker gardens and the forest schools and things like that because research shows that children today are actually becoming nature deficient because they're not outdoors enough for a number of reasons. Could be the neighborhood they live in. It could be the climate. It could be a number of different things, but we really do try to talk to families about the importance of playing outdoors. Even think about the vision and vision health. And I spoke to a doctor at a conference, and he told me that they're seeing more vision problems in children who are in first and second grade now because children are staying inside.

And when you look at things inside, everything stays still. But when you're outside, things are constantly moving and it's giving your eyesight and your, the part of, I think your occipital lobe in your brain is being developed. When everything is moving, nothing is staying still. So even for that alone, but we really do try to encourage families to get outdoors and explore thinking about a, a one or a one-year old child, just learning how to walk and walking outdoors, where everything is uneven, help support that development of not only walking, but the balance involved in walking. And I encourage everything to be outdoors if I can. , one of my big things is taking literacy outdoors. So not just taking books outside, but playing with sidewalk, chalk, playing, I spy, having scavenger hunts, things like that, where your children can still engage in learning language outdoors and kids love it. I know Esther and Anmarie, you've done scavenger hunts that are a lot of fun.

Ryan Shuler:

Can either of you share sort of what that looks like, like what prep is needed to come up with a scavenger hunt. Do kids have images? Are there words sort of, how do you set that up as a parent for your child?

Anmarie Stiller:

We did one down here. We have a park that we tend to go to a lot to. We actually went in simple stuff from the dollar tree, nothing extravagant high end, but they had like bug things that you can get to collect bugs in the netting, the magnifying glasses. Now you can make your own bug catchers with like, cheese cloth, over a cup, or, you know, go back to when we went around and collected lightning bugs and put 'em in a can and everything lit up at night.

I mean, I remember doing that as a kid. But like we took pictures of things that we saw, that would be in nature. We made real life. We didn't do like cartoonish pictures. So it was like a real life tree, a squirrel, a frog. So they knew what the real picture was of the animal. We would put the picture. Then we would put what the name of the animal was, or item the rock or something. And then through the walk, they had a brown paper bag that they would put it in. Even our infants in the stroller, the parents took leaves and held them by them. Obviously, we made sure they weren't poisonous or anything crazy or bugs, but like just letting an infant just feel that leaf rub against their face. They were experiencing texture. And the sounds that it made when it crumbles. So nature walks are huge. And another great thing is bubbles. Everybody loves bubbles. Bubbles can go for every age under the sun. Bubbles can be big. Bubbles can be small. Bubbles are amazing. They're soothing. They can be exciting. You can jump high. Everybody needs bubbles in their lives. A bubble machine. My child is 13 and still gets bubbles in her Easter basket. Cause we're just, I love bubbles and sidewalk chalk. I still, sidewalk chalk, like that's a huge, like there's so much in those two little learning things that are so like, you would say open ended, go draw lines, go make-up game outside.

I mean, during COVID we took duct tape and we're making different designs on the sidewalk. And the kids were like coloring all these different designs and artworks for sidewalk chalk. Glow sticks are another cool thing. When it snows taking the glow sticks outside and stuffing them in the snow and trying to find the colors of the glow sticks. I know we're talking about summer and snow, but sorry, but there's just so many things to do outside. Anything you can do inside, you can do outside.

Ryan Shuler:

I love that you bring that up. From the adult perspective, so many of the things you're talking about is being aware of the textures and the sounds and the colors. From me in a wellbeing perspective, that's basic mindfulness, right? Is being aware of your surroundings, being present in that moment. So from the child perspective, they're learning all of these new things, but also if the parent can slow down enough To understand that too, that decreases a parent stress level. The parent is learning to be more mindful, all of those positive benefits that come with mindfulness. And it's something that you're doing together.

I do want to go back to a point that Lori you said before being outside, if it's safe. And I think that a lot of times we don't consider that that. There could be inequities in different neighborhoods or where you live that, you know, walking down the street is not feasible for a lot of people. So Esther, since you're sort of in Wilmington, I'm curious, what your perspective on this is that safety and being outdoor perspective, or if there are any parks or, or anything that you can recommend where you can do these things in a safer space.

For those listening, the University of Delaware has a benefit with all of the State parks. So even if you live outside of the state of Delaware, because you work at UD, you can get a state park pass for the in-state rate, which is half as much. So even, you know, myself, I live in Pennsylvania, I can still pay the \$35 rate. And then that gets me into all of the state parks. I think if anyone has questions on how this works or questions of parks in your area or reputable sources, please reach out to us at Employee Health and Wellbeing. We do a lot of this nature-based stuff, and then can do a little research for you and help you find a safe space in your area where you can engage in, in some of this type of play. I think just to sort of wrap up, one thing that I am hearing consistently from all three of you, is that for kids to be learning, for kids to feel fulfilled, and honestly, to make it easy for parents, like really getting back to the basics with

play and activities is really important here. So if you all have, if you could just go round Robin sort of your favorite toy or your favorite game that you can share that maybe parents can sort of look into or, or help their child with. Lori, I'll start with you.

Lori Keller:

I would say any kind of blocks, whether it's Legos, whether it's wooden blocks, whether it's some kind of natural blocks that they have made out of actual tree branches that are cut. Blocks give you an opportunity to engage in a number of different activities, whether it's dramatic play and building a zoo for the animals or a farm for the animals or just stacking, you know, and having building towers and challenges like that. So I would definitely say blocks of any sort.

Ryan Shuler:

That's great. Anmarie, how about you?

Anmarie Stiller:

Think you guys know I'm going with my favorite, bubbles, bubbles and sidewalk chalk and cardboard boxes from Amazon. And you can do endless things with those three things. I mean, the boxes alone. Like I could go on for hours right now. I'm like trying to hold myself back. I mean, my daughter is 13 and still loves to get a good size box and decorate it and stuff herself in it and put stickers and so many things you can do with a box. And again, the sidewalk chalk and bubbles, just endless possibilities.

Ryan Shuler:

So I will share, I'll call this a parenting hack, I guess. When my husband was traveling for work... my kids are less than two years apart, so I had 2 under 2. It was COVID there were some days where I just, you know, I just had had enough and like cooking dinner was all I could do. So I would stick them each in a box with a couple crayons. So then they were in my visions. I knew where they were. I knew they were safe, and they thought it was like the most fun thing in the world. And then I could cook dinner and not have to worry about it. So I will second, the Amazon boxes for sure. And Esther, how about you?

Esther Lauser:

That's something I learned from Lori is doing that writing on a vertical surface, they're using completely different muscles. Instead of looking down at a device, their head is at a completely different angle. They're looking at things from a completely different perspective. So thank you, Lori, for teaching me that. And bubbles, in this center, bubbles are absolutely a drug. It just magically changes every child's mood. I don't know what it is. That magic is the only word I have for 'em, but my favorite activity, you'll laugh. So it's using clean house paint brushes, any kind of a bucket, a sand bucket works great, of water, an empty spray bottle and chalk. So kids can paint the sidewalk and watch the sun make the water magically disappear.

They think they're painting. They can use the chalk on that same wet spot and see how the chalk disappears, filling up the water. Even if it's winter time, they'll still enjoy doing that, but working the fine motor skills and squeezing that, that's one that if you give kids three hours, they'll continue doing that. They love that activity.

Ryan Shuler:

That's great. And, and I would encourage everyone to look at, you know, your local community resources as well. There's a lot of things. You know, our, our local library puts on a lot of activities for kids. And some of it is at a specific time or some of it is you come pick up a craft and you can do it at home. Same things with like local community parks. The city of Newark did a lot with things for kids, your state parks. So just do a little digging and do a little research to all of your points, it doesn't always have to be this big extravagant thing is, you know, it's summer, give your kids a break from their strict curriculum at school and just kind of let them play and engage in a way that's to your point, that's interesting to them. any, any final, like last minute tips for parents or anything before we close out, I honestly will say I very much appreciate this as a parent. Two little ones and a 12-year-old that you've given me a lot of good ideas to sort of keep them entertained for the next two months. But any other sort of last closing tips or anything?

Anmarie Stiller:

Just have fun and embrace the summer. Go jump in a puddle when it rains. Go lay, put stuff outside and watch it fade on construction paper and make shadows and look at the clouds and just have fun with your children and your families.

Ryan Shuler:

I love that.

Lori Keller:

Yeah, agree.

Esther Lauser:

Be in the moment. That's exactly what children are teaching us. I was in my office this morning and heard our two and three-year-old classroom giggling down the hall. And I got to leave my silly email and go play with children for 10 minutes and not worry about what I was doing. Children just want you to be present and to be engaged with them. It's really very simple and we make it much more complicated.

Lori Keller:

Yeah, just show interest in what they're doing. Follow their lead.

Ryan Shuler:

This has all been really wonderful. I think this has been a lot of great activities suggestions games. , but also I really appreciate your ties to the social connection, the wellbeing, both for the children and the parents. I think that again, to your point, mindfulness and, and being present will help our kids set up for success. It helps us kind of maintain our stress level. So I do really appreciate you sort of tying the, the wellbeing components into this. Even if it wasn't done intentionally, you all did a great job of pulling that in. So thank you all very much, and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

Outro:

Thank you for listening to the UnDeniably Well podcast. For all things wellbeing at UD, visit our website Udel.edu/wellbeing. There you can access our on-demand library, subscribe to our newsletter and see what's coming up to help you on your wellbeing journey. Until next time, be well.