



Professional Development
Transcript of Podcast No. 3 from the online course *The First Six Weeks of Preschool*

Hello, everyone, and welcome to the third part of our four-part professional development podcast series *The First Six Weeks of Preschool*.

I'm Beth from Teaching Strategies, and I'm so glad to have to have you back.

In our first two podcasts, we looked at some really big ideas for preschool, including the importance of formative assessment as the basis for intentional teaching and the ways that your classroom rules can be used not just to help guide children's behavior but also to support their social-emotional development.

Now, you may recall that I mentioned in Podcast 1 that things like assessment and classroom rules may not be considered as important as *other* items on your overall to-do list, things like individualizing learning and guiding children's social-emotional development. But I hope that, as we've worked our way through these first two podcasts, you've come to understand that, in fact, formative assessment is essential for individualizing learning and that involving the children in establishing your shared expectations for how you'll treat each other this year is key to supporting their social-emotional development.

In this podcast, I want to focus on some other important people—namely, the children's families—as well some important aspects of the PLACES for learning—that is, your indoor and outdoor classroom spaces.

Let me take a moment here to explain that, when I talk about outdoor classroom spaces, I mean that to include whatever outdoor play space you may have as well as any other outdoor spaces you and the children have access to on a regular basis.

As we here at Teaching Strategies hear from and visit preschool programs across the country, we are repeatedly struck by the great variability in the outdoor spaces that teachers and children have access to. Your outdoor space is dependent not just on the type of program you are part of and the age-range of the children there, but also your geography. Your climate.

Whether your program is in an urban, suburban, small-town, or rural area. What your surrounding neighborhood is like. So it's always really important to think about what's available to *you* and how you and the children can make the most of it.

Everywhere we visit, we see teachers who are being intentional and innovative in the ways that they make use of their outdoor spaces and children who are benefitting from that planning.

Like the schools in Florida that keep their art easels and water table outside nearly all year long.

Or those in the Northeast and Midwest and Alaska and Canada, where children use ice and snow as building materials.

Or those all over the place that have created vegetable and flower gardens that the children tend to throughout the growing season.

The point is that you need to look for ways to make the most of *your* outdoor spaces as a learning environment, just as you do with your indoor learning environment.

Children need to move. They need to explore. They need to discover. All of these things are so easily accomplished by simply moving your learning experiences outside. So, look for ways to take your learning experiences—such as choice time—outside. Take your *Intentional Teaching Cards*™ outside. Take your *Mighty Minutes*® outside. The truth is that there are very few learning experiences that take place inside that you can't replicate outside.

When considering ways to make the most of whatever outdoor areas are available to you, you will want to make sure that they are safe and accessible for all the children in your class. You will want to pay attention to the equipment that you use outdoors, particularly if it's something that remains exposed to the elements outside. Check regularly to make sure everything is clean and in good repair.

But of course, there will be many times when all of you are *inside*. Regardless of whether you are working inside or out, the point is to always be looking for ways that your learning *environment* supports your learning *objectives*.

As we move on to discussing the *people* who are so important to children's learning, I want to add a quick word here specifically about non-English-speaking families and their children who are English-language or dual-language learners.

If there are children and families in your program who speak a different language from you, then, yes, your job of communicating with them is made more difficult. But always remember that the most important aspects of helping people feel welcomed and valued cross language barriers. A genuine smile. A warm greeting. An accepting environment.

Also remember that special invitations are often more valued, and thus more readily accepted, than general ones. Issuing a blanket statement such as "All are welcome!" is nice, but compare that to something like "Hello, Mrs. Rivera! I wanted to personally invite you to our classroom open house next Tuesday! I am eager to show you some of the many things that Anna is working on at school!"

Here's a real-life example of that strategy. Several years ago, I was working at a school where we conducted an annual improvement process that was to include input from families. The first year I was there, I issued what I thought was a very lovely open invitation, saying, "We value family input! Anyone who wants to join us is welcome at our planning meeting." Well, no one came. But the next year, in addition to sending out the blanket invitation, I personally contacted a few families that I thought could offer some valuable ideas and interesting perspectives. Every single one of them not only showed up for the meeting, but they all contributed in ways that I never could've thought of on my own.

One of the most important messages for me that came out of that meeting is what I came to think of as the wisdom of "just because...they love their child." It goes something like this.

Just because...

A family *lives in a certain neighborhood*, tells you nothing about how much they love their child.

Just because...

A family *has a certain structure*, tells you nothing about how much they love their child.

Just because...

A family is of a certain skin color or ethnic heritage, speaks a certain language, or follows a certain religion, tells you nothing about how much they love their child.

The fact is, all children and families, regardless of what descriptors can be applied to them, deserve to feel welcomed. Valued. Respected. Capable.

So, here's an exercise for you to help you determine if your classroom is indeed a place that welcomes all children and families.

On a piece of paper, make two columns. At the top of one, write "I want children and families to feel...."

At the top of the other column, write "I DON'T want children and families to feel...."

Then make a list with at least five words that can complete each of those sentences. For example, you may think, "I want children and families to feel...welcome, valued, and respected," and "I DON'T want families to feel ignored, neglected, or unappreciated."

Then look around your learning spaces. Think about the *messages you are sending through your learning environment*. Start listing what you see and hear and think about that would lead to those positive feelings on your first list, and, whatever those things are, keep doing them.

Then think about ways that your environment may be inadvertently leading to those feelings that you DON'T want to provoke and add those to your second list. Whatever makes it onto that second list, well, you're going to want to find ways to move those items to the first one.

Here's an example. Perhaps one of the items on your second list is that you don't want children to feel rushed. Or stressed. Or overwhelmed. Think about the message it sends if every day, at a predetermined—yet, to them, pretty arbitrary—time, children are told to end their projects, dismantle their constructions, and not just put away their work but sometimes completely destroy it. You may inadvertently be sending the message that tidying up is more important than investing in a long-term, multi-day, extended project. What could you do, instead, to either let them continue the project the next day or, if that's not a reasonable possibility, to make a record of it with something like a photograph or short video?

Eventually, expand your thinking to include the other messages you send through things like your daily schedule; the ways you communicate with families, both formally and informally; the visitors you invite to your classroom; and the ways you celebrate the children's learning.

If you feel comfortable doing so, share your lists with a colleague or supervisor to get additional perspective on the messages you're sending, because the fact is that sometimes we don't see ourselves or interpret our own actions in the same ways that others do.

Throughout the coming year, revisit this exercise and add the word *lately* to your questions—"What have I done LATELY to cause children and families to feel a certain way?"—always being intentional in ensuring that the actions you're taking to send positive messages continues to grow throughout the year.

And speaking of the *coming year*, join me next time for our fourth and final podcast, where we will turn our attention to the concept of TIME in the preschool classroom.