

33 - Engaging Families and Children with Take-Home Theme Bags

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Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley Speaker: Hello: everyone and welcome to Early Childhood Chatter with Dr. Shipley and Dr. Heald. We will upload a new episode every other week on Wednesdays.

Host Dr. Heald Speaker: Twice a month, we will come to you with a 10-minute professional development that you can quickly listen to for new ideas to try.

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Today we have with us Teresa McKay, and Teresa has been a practitioner in the field for almost 42 years. She's been in the role of teacher, director, owner, professor, and now author.

She has a BS in elementary education from IU, an MA in education from Concordia-St. Paul, and a doctorate degree in ECE from North Central. She is the owner, the trainer, and the consultant for hands-on learning ECE.

Welcome, Teresa.

Teresa McKay: Thanks.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Teresa, I love the topic that you're bringing to us today because it's really, truly something that we have done in our classrooms, and I can say that I've personally used take-home bags in my classroom to engage families.

The title of your session for the ECE conference is *Engaging Families and Children with Take-Home Themed Bags***.** Can you tell us what this is and why it's important?

Teresa McKay Speaker: Okay. Well, this came from actually me writing my book and doing some research in family engagement and focusing on NAEYC's principle of family engagement on connecting learning at home.

And so, a lot of times we don't take into consideration how we can do this well and connect our families to what's going on in the classroom. So anytime that you have a unit or a topic or a project or whatever that you're concentrating on, you can create this take-home theme bag to send home to the families to connect those ideas. So, connecting activities that you do in the classroom and then putting them in this bag and providing everything for them.

So, all they have to do is open the bag and they have an instant almost theme unit in their fingertips that they can do with their children at home.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: I love the advice of including everything because you are right. When our families have access to it, they're truly more apt to learn from it and engage in it.

As you think about these learning bags, why are they important for our youngest learners and our families?

Teresa McKay Speaker: Again, I think it's that connection of providing families with an understanding of what it is that we actually do in the classroom. So beyond just doing the activities, they're making connections to DAP. They are making connections to early learning standards and PILES developmental milestones.

So, they're understanding and making those connections that while it seems like their children are playing, they're actually learning valuable skills and techniques that they will need to move further in their education. Once a family has made that connection, they're eager by in large to learn more and to be involved more. And that's our goal for family engagement.

Not only to help support them in that learning environment, but also to get them to create their own activities with their children so that they can go, oh, hey, you know, our kid just asked us about this particular thing, so we're going to go explore this topic.

And then they have the tools under their belt to really kind of do this on their own at home and in the community.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: So, I understand that these are just a way to connect and engage, and we're really kind of putting, you know, the framework in there for our families to have developmentally appropriate, you know, tools, resources and everything in their home.

So, I'm going to role play a little bit. I'm going to put on two different caps. So, I'm a new teacher, and I have just gone to your presentation about these family bags.

And I want to know, what is my first step? What do I need to do to get one of these theme bags up and ready to go?

Teresa McKay Speaker: You know, my advice to anybody that starts doing any type of hands-on project for their children in the classroom or outside of the classroom is to write it down on paper. Get your theme, your topic, your subject, whatever it is that you want to create. And just start sketching it out on paper and see where it takes you.

I think that any good creative person will do that to begin with. So just start sketching it out. And then basically in the presentation, I will be outlining those steps exactly.

You know what needs to be included? What are the elements? What are the key elements that we need to put in there? Well, we have learning centers in the classroom. We want to cover those areas in that bag as well. So, I would start sketching out ideas.

What books can I put in this bag? What manipulatives can I put in this bag? What dramatic play props can I put in there? That would really, A, be inexpensive for me to either create or purchase. And then B, easy for the families to understand and know what to do with the instructions. Then after I've got all of those elements put together, then I start outlining my instructions for the family.

Okay, so in this portion of the bag, you will find this, this, and this materials. Here's what you do with it. And I give them the step-by-step instructions of what they need to do.

At the very end of that activity, then on the instructions card, I will give them this activity meets standard, you know, whatever it is for whatever state or PILES developmental milestone or what have you. So again, they have it all in, you know, it together. But to get started, again, I just say, just sketch it out.

What do you want to put in there? What's best going to represent and make those connections for the family?

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: As an administrator and with that administrative tap on, I love the fact that you mentioned aligning to standards and the developmentally appropriate practices, because that, again, just strengthens that classroom community and what you're working on in the environment in school. So that's great. I also love the fact that you mentioned supporting families.

Step-by-step really allows them with that level of support. Okay, now I'm going to flip to my family. You know, I'm a family member who has this sack that comes home.

What am I seeing in the sack? Like, give me an example of, you know, a theme backpack that I can just visualize.

Teresa McKay Speaker: Okay, well, the one that I'll be demonstrating in my presentation is based on the book, *Diary of a Worm*. One of my favorite theme units to do with kiddos preschool age, but you know what? I also did it in my family home program.

So, I incorporated all of the kids in that activity bag. And so, the first thing they're going to find is a letter to them that outlines everything that's in there, what it's for, why it is given to them, and how to use it. And then it's kind of like opening a Christmas present, I think, where you just kind of keep pulling out these little magic things that you're going to get to create.

And I think the most important element that's exciting for families is that they don't have to think about it. It's already prepared for them. They don't have anything to do, except for pull it out and use it with the children.

Now, for example, in the dramatic play area, they might have to maybe be a little bit creative and go outside of their comfort zone. Like, for example, if I'm providing puppets in that area, then they may have to maybe kind of follow their child's lead on script building. But that's okay, because that's the magic of engaging the family and the child together in that, because the child's going to bring elements that they've learned at school into their play at home.

And vice versa. So, I think it's just super... To me, it's like opening a Christmas present. I just can't find a better way to describe it.

Other than it's like, you know, as a parent, I try to think as a parent when I'm working on these things. And so, as a parent, especially in my younger career, you know, when I first started, if I had had that sent home from one of my kiddo's classes, I would be like, oh my gosh, look at all this wonderful stuff that we can explore together. You know, so I try to think that way so that families will really have that same kind of magical thinking as well.

I don't want them to open it and go, oh my gosh, I got to go through all of this stuff. You know, I want it to be, you know, pleasing and exciting for them. And I think that really the letter of introduction kind of sets that up for them.

And then as they pull out the components and explore what's in there. I also try to leave at least one or two things that the family can keep to remind them of the topics that they've explored in this bag to continue that education outside of the take-home bag.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Yeah, that's cool.

I've never heard about that. That is really cool. You know, what I love is the fact that we're sitting here talking about something that we know is research-based.

We know it creates that connection, but the bigger picture is it creates excitement. When you started to talk about it, you got excited. You could hear the intonation in your voice.

And just like you said, we want families to just, when that backpack comes home, when the kiddos take that home, we want them to share that excitement. And I can hear it in your voice and I can almost see it in, you know, the homes of our kids. So, I just appreciate that so much.

It's just really taking that enjoyment for learning and helping us build those connections and engagements. I love that. So as we wind down today, can you give us just three takeaways that we want to leave our listeners with?

Teresa McKay Speaker: Okay.

Well, I think probably the most important takeaway is that this is a way to develop a relationship with a family. You know, we talk about family engagement. We, you know, have open door policies and such, but really it's all about relationships.

And so, when we can build that relationship with a family by saying, hey, I've got this great thing that I'm going to send home with you that you can experience what your child experiences in the classroom. I think that that really lays a foundational milestone for them. And then, you know, again, families start connecting DAP and the PILES developmental milestones and early learning standards.

I think that's the second most important piece. And then, you know, people who are listening or people who attend this presentation will actually get to see a real live demonstration of one of these bags and some tips and tricks on how to do these so inexpensively. And that's probably the other key thing is, is that you do not have to spend a lot of money on these bags.

A lot of it is teacher created ideas and materials. So hopefully, you know, the expenses cut down.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: The creativity that you have shared with us today is just amazing.

And I know that I'm inspired to just put one of these bags together for my own use in my own classroom. So, I'm really excited for that. We always leave our listeners with a challenge.

Do you have a challenge for our listeners?

Teresa McKay Speaker: I do. I think that the challenge I have is to really, to look at this particular aspect, this take-home activity bag, as a way to really dive into outreaching to the families, to partner with them, as I said earlier, to really start that relationship process. Because once they've done that, again, the excitement from the families by and large, you know, there's always going to be a few that aren't going to come on board.

But by and large, the excitement from the families is going to have them coming to you. So, start sketching out ideas that you have for these bags. You know, they, a lot of mine are based off of children's books because that's just kind of where I like to go with them.

But you can also just do like if you, you know, if you're doing a theme unit on, you know, bugs or what have you, you know, any of those theme units or a project that you're doing, you know, start sketching out those ideas, get yourself a notebook and take some notes and just have a page for each idea that you have. And then, you know, go from there. Like during dental week, you can contact your local pediatric dentist and say, hey, I want to put together this bag.

Is there some stuff that you can provide me in exchange for, you know, hey, we'll put a card in there with your advertising on it. So really, you know, a just kind of sketching it out, start planning your ideas and then start brainstorming of what can be included, where you can find those materials.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: So, it really starts with the planning and the baby steps, but ultimately, we're really focused on just creating that excitement for learning.

Dr. McKay, thank you so much for your time today. Please check out Dr. McKay's presentation on the Early Childhood Education YouTube channel, which will be shared in the notes section of this podcast. Dr. McKay, again, thank you so much for sharing your information and your time with us today.

Teresa McKay Speaker: My pleasure.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: And don't forget to subscribe to the podcast.