

66 - Helping Your "Not-so-Typical" Learner in Early Childhood

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Audience: Current Active & Enrolled Students

Episode Transcript

Host Dr. Shipley: 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: 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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Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: We are so excited about our guest today. Valeria Fontanals is a Harvard graduate award-winning learning expert, and a licensed school psychologist in Florida.

She brings more than 20 years of experience, helping children to optimize their learning to succeed in school and in life. Thank you so much for being here today, Valeria. This is such an important topic, not only for teachers and admin, but parents and families.

So, thank you.

Valeria Fontanals Speaker: Absolutely. Thank you for inviting me.

It's a pleasure.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Yes. So today, you're going to talk about the not-so-typical learner in early childhood education.

And this is something that most all of us have encountered or encounter on a daily basis, right?

Valeria Fontanals Speaker: Yes, absolutely. And for one reason or the other, I see that this is something more kind of a trend than before.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Yeah, you're exactly right.

And I think it's because we're learning more, and we know more, and there's more research out there, and more people are learning about children. So, I just want to start with the family members, because they are the biggest part of this, in my opinion. So, as a family member who has never had any early childhood education, how can they tell if their child is struggling or even is a little bit delayed?

Valeria Fontanals Speaker: Good question.

If it's the first child, and the only child and they have no information about child development, I would suggest to go to the CDC Apple Tracker, that provides specific information about the milestones that should be happening in different age groups. And of course, always refer to the pediatrician, and to the teacher. But if you as a parent want to research yourself, that could be something to look up to.

At least in order to gather more information about what are the expectations, and the milestones that each child should be reaching at different points, right?

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Right. So, I have a quick question. In most communities, or I know the communities that I have lived in, there are

different resources that parents could reach out.

Is that everywhere? Or is that just very few and far between, to get help and have someone look at their child too, you know?

Valeria Fontanals Speaker: Yeah, so it's not always the case. And sometimes if you want to reach out for evaluations, maybe you have to wait for a long time. And that's where it starts running the time, in which the parents want to do something about it, and they don't have the access for it.

So that's challenging. But at least I think if nowadays in the world of online media, having those milestones, at least can give you some idea in terms of what are the expectations of what should be happening in language development, in social-emotional skills, in terms of the motor skills. And of course, every child is different.

And we shouldn't be also like stuck to the specifics of achieving at the same time as everyone else those milestones. But there are months that are expected to be happening certain things in the brain, right? So, I think that that's why like the CDC guideline, it could be at least, well, a guideline in order to know a little bit more about what are the expectations and eventually if there's something else that as a parent, we have to do. Now, it is extremely important to know that no matter what, the brain is a muscle, and the brain doesn't necessarily develop by itself.

It develops in context. So the number one thing that I would suggest, maybe for a parent who may be wondering what to do in order to make sure that my child will be okay, or like develop accordingly, is what it's called like listening to your child, looking at the eye, listening to the needs, and then responding to that need.

That interaction between the child and the parent, even if it seems very basic, it's extremely important because it's creating in the child's brain, different areas and connecting them together, sense of what is happening in the world, and that eventually it's gonna then impact on what sound my dad is making that then connecting that to a word and then eventually expressing and repeating that word, for example.

So that servant return that it's called in the sense of listening and looking and paying attention to my child's needs, and what he's doing or she's doing or saying and then returning and providing that feedback, that I would say that it's the basic of what parents can be doing. Again, it seems easy, but sometimes it's not due to all the other challenges that we have as parents, in the everyday life, but that connection, it's glue for the upcoming development.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: You know, Valeria, you brought such a great point together, that we really want to embrace the years we have with our youngest learners, our early childhood learners because the development is so fast and it's progressing just at a really rapid rate.

So, I think we can really understand what families are looking for, with the developmental milestones. We also want to factor in that a large population of our audience is educators. So, as an educator, you are seeing some maybe developmental delays or some developmental milestones that are just not being met.

What advice do you have for our educators or our practitioners?

Valeria Fontanals Speaker: Yeah, I always say that teachers, early childhood teachers have a lot of responsibility and at the same time, they are glue for the child's, I would say, like potential, developmental potential, because those are the people who are spending the most of the time with these kids. They are the most knowledgeable, compared to eventually parents who may not have that information. And even though pediatricians, of course, they typically see the kids once a year.

So, they are the ones who can make the most impact on these children's lives. And I've seen and I work with a lot of educators that they struggle a lot in terms of what to do, and how to help them best. The communication with when the teacher identified that something is off, and maybe it's not as expected compared to other children in the age group.

Having, like communicating it well with the parents, its glue, because it's going to happen. And most of the times, at least it happens, but maybe the parent is not necessarily seeing the same things that the teacher is seeing. So, having that partnership, it's essential for the child's improvement, right? In order to reach out for services and interventions.

One key that I would suggest to the teachers is keeping documentation in terms of what is happening in the classroom. And when I say documentation, it's either like writing notes in terms of what she was able to do or not. Then having that milestones written and then compare and show the parents about these are the expectations for the class.

Your child, we tried this activity and he wasn't able to do so. For example, we typically know that children should be walking between 9 and 14 months. That age, you know, it's wide, the range.

But until a specific point, like if the child is not necessarily walking at 14 months, that it's kind of a red flag, right? We have to do something about it. So, documenting what is happening, explaining to the parents that they are in the same boat and that they want to help the child. It's glue for the parents to understand that it's not that they are being or feeling judged by the teachers, but it's more about a partnership and a team to work with the child.

Once you get those, like the parents and the teachers together, that's where you can see that the child eventually can make the most of any intervention. So, one, it's the observation, discussing the concerns, and the red flags, with the parents and then providing resources or providing options in terms of what to do next, right? And that's something that some teachers can definitely provide some interventions within the classroom, but then sometimes you need to reach out to professionals. An early intervention, it's glue for the child's overall development.

There's a lot of research that, as you may know, that the first three, four years of the human beings, the brain develops the most during these four years.

So, what is, we can identify those red flags, as soon as possible and get started on working on those skills, the trajectory in terms of what the potential of this particular child will be, would look like very different than if we don't do the work during these early years. So having that professional support, let's say by speech therapists, occupational therapists, clinical psychologists, counselors, and early interventionists is glue for the child's progress.

Dr. Stephanie Heald Speaker: Valeria, you said so many great things that I just want to kind of recap. I think that documentation is essential for educators, because that's another way for us to communicate what we're seeing to those research professionals that have specialties that we might not have. I always tell my students that we are not, you know, we are not practitioners in specialized areas.

There are so many resources out there for us to go to, to just like you said, get those systems and those processes in place, to support the children and families. And I just love that you said that. Do you have, we always try to leave our listeners with three takeaways.

Do you have three takeaways for our listeners, that they can just kind of reflect on as they leave here?

Valeria Fontanals Speaker: Yes. One is that the brain, as I said before, is a muscle. So, no matter the delay that your child may have, the muscle can be worked on.

And it depends on what you do, the interventions that you do, the context that you do, that will help that amazing brain develop. So, it doesn't matter if you have a specific diagnosis or even within a genetic disorder, there's so much that you can do beyond the specific diagnosis. The glue at this age is early intervention.

So, it's to provide this child with the specific resources, to overcome those challenges. And then at the same time, I will think about what is called like a growth mindset approach in terms of thinking that, again, the intelligence or any skill is

not fixed, but it's something that we can work on. If we have as parents and teachers that the growth mindset in which we can provide those interventions to these children and have high expectations about them, then I bet because I've been working with for these 22 years with a lot of children struggling for different reasons, I do see the growth, that it's very important.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: This has been a great topic, because it is so important. And I think teachers and families both struggle with this and differentiating for students and things like that. So, what is one challenge as we wrap-up your session that you would like to leave our listeners with?

Valeria Fontanals Speaker: With children who are typically delayed or they're struggling, as parents and as teachers, we typically focus a lot on what is missing.

What is the child not necessarily doing? I would suggest that, of course, we have to take care of that but start thinking also about one strength or one big interest that this particular child has, and keep on providing strategies and experiences for that child to keep on developing that strength.

Because in my opinion, at the end of the day, as an adult, that eventually it's going to be the specific area that this person, at the end of the day is going to maybe work on or have a life based on that strength, and not necessarily on those areas of weaknesses.

Dr. Tisha Shipley Speaker: Thank you so much.

And I appreciate you so much for being here. And I hope you'll join us again. Thank you.

Valeria Fontanals Speaker: Absolutely. Thank you so much. Have a great day.

Dr. Tisha Shipley: You, too.