

Providing Culturally Responsive and Individualized Infant and Toddler Care

A Place for Me: Diverse, Engaging Environments for Infants and Toddlers

Danny Torres: Hello, everyone. Welcome to the fourth and final session of our online conversation series, Providing Culturally Responsive and Individualized Infant and Toddler Care. Today's topic, A Place for Me: Diverse, Engaging Environments for Infants and Toddlers. Thank you all very much for joining us to speak about this very important topic. My name is Danny Torres. I serve as WestEd's Senior Manager of Publications and Dissemination. Now, before we move into the contents of today's session, I'd like to take a brief moment to introduce WestEd.

WestEd is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan education research, development, and service agency. At WestEd, we believe that learning changes lives. Every day we partner with schools and communities across the country to improve outcomes for youth and adults of all ages. Today's conversation is one really important facet of the work that we do at WestEd, and I encourage you all to visit us at WestEd.org to learn more. Now I'd like to introduce Heather McClellan-Brandusa, child development consultant with the early learning and care division at the California Department of Education. She'll be introducing the session today. Take it away, Heather.

Heather McClellan-Brandusa:

Good afternoon, everyone. My name is Heather McClellan-Brandusa and I'm with the California Department of Education. It's so exciting to see all of you here today, and I wanna thank you for taking the time during your mid-day to join us for this important topic. As you're all aware, high quality learning environments for young children, especially infants and toddlers, is so important for their success. I'm so pleased to be a partner with WestEd in the work of the PITC, and the California Department of Education has been a proud partner as well and supporter of the PITC for over 30 years now. Today I would like to introduce Peter Mangione, Senior Managing Director at WestEd.

I first met Peter at a PITC Training Institute for home visitors that I attended with my Early Head Start Staff. And I remember the time he took at our mealtimes together to really get to know us and to listen to us and share stories with us of his own daughters and how that made me feel valued. And I remember thinking that that's exactly how we want all of our children and families that we work with to feel. Peter and his team, all of his team at the PITC, really demonstrate the parallel process of this relationship. Building relationships really truly is at the heart of high quality care for infants and toddlers.

So, now I would like to introduce Peter to frame the discussion and start the conversation that we're gonna have today. Go ahead, Peter.

Peter Mangione: Thank you, Heather, for that wonderful introduction. I remember our first conversations. It's always special to have a chance to interact with people and learn about what you're doing. And we learn as much as we offer in learning when we have those kinds of events. I am delighted today to introduce two friends and colleagues who have worked in our field for many years and have approached it very thoughtfully as we have this very important discussion around looking at infant toddler care as a place for me. One of our panelists is Mary Jane McGuire-Fong. Mary Jane is an author and professor emerita of early childhood education at American River College in Sacramento, California.

She has been a preschool teacher, Infant Center Director and administrator of early childhood programs in the migrant farmworker community. She is the author of "Teaching and Learning with Infants and Toddlers: Where Meaning Making Begins." Recently released in a new edition and co-author of, "Infant and Toddler Development from Conception to Age 3: What Babies Ask of Us". Both wonderful books. I would highly recommend. Mary Jane holds degrees in child development and psychology and has completed a fellowship in infant parent mental health.

Our other panelist is Marcela Clark. Marcela lives in Houston, Texas, in the Houston, Texas area and has over 35 years experience in the field of early childhood education. Holding an array of diverse positions in administration, consultation, and higher education. Presently, Marcela works as a senior manager overseeing the United Way Bright Beginnings Program, a city-wide quality improvement program attending underserved populations. She has been a Touchpoints national trainer since 2007. Marcela holds a master's degree in human development from Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, California. Welcome, Mary Jane and

Marcela. I'm looking forward so much to hearing your thoughts today about this most important topic.

Mary Jane Fong: Thank you, Peter.

Peter Mangione: You're welcome. Our topic is A Place for Me. And we think about A Place for Me as an infant and toddler, no matter who I am, while I'm not with my family. And as we've thought about this topic and thought about what a place for me means to infants and toddlers, we right away came to the concept of, what does home mean. And as we explore that idea of what home means, it can mean different things to different folks and different infants. And we can't assume that we all have the same meaning of home in mind when we say the words. And I'm wondering if you could, I'll start with you Marcela, help us understand this idea, the personal meaning of what home means. And you know, we talk about programs, creating a home away from home or connecting with the home, the child's home. What does that look like in infant-toddler care?

Marcela Clark: Well, thank you, first of all, for having me, and thank you to all the participants that are here today. I just wanted to say, first of all, that Peter, Mary Jane and our dear friend, Dr. Lally have been so influential in my life, and all the goodness that has taken place here in Houston has been highly influenced by the training that I received at WestEd and the amazing trips and experiences. The Reggio, to Astoria, to China. They changed the course of my journey forever. And you probably don't know that, but you have been tremendously significant in my life. So thank you.

So, as you heard at the beginning in the introduction, I oversee this program in the Houston area. We presently have around 50 centers serving home-base as well as childcare centers with very diverse populations, but all of them, populations that live in the fringes of society. So, when we think about home, given the fact that we serve families who are actually homeless and families who are living in shelters, we really have to think very hard about what does it mean to create a place for people who need to have a place where they belong and a place that they can call home.

So, creating a place for infants and toddlers in this case, I would like just to tell you briefly the story of these families in Houston that are in very different, in different and difficult situations. First as I said, homelessness and domestic violence shelters, teen parent centers, immigrants who are in extreme poverty... What it really requires in our case is the addition of all of our experiences on how we can support everyone involved. What we know is that it requires preparation, not only the mind or the

intellect, but also a preparation of the emotions in the heart. So, we looked at providers that need to have proper cognitive training, but also, they need to have a training that support them emotionally so they can work with clients who are living in constant trauma.

The training and support provided to the providers leads to an expert way of listening, to really understanding the child and the parent, and to opening their heart to love them. So, parents and children, I mean, we can never separate them. So, when there is that transition process or period of time between the time that the parent drop off the child, the parent needs to feel welcome and needs to be loved and appreciated. Ultimately, this is a place where we recognize that the child is competent, the parent is competent and by far the expert of their child, and that the provider as well is competent and the expert within the context of their work.

So, that's, you know, in a nutshell how we see this place where families need to belong and some of the standards that we need to have. But what home means will always vary from family to family, but certainly there are basic needs that must be present for the child, the parent, and the provider for them to be able to really build a community, to build a family, even if it's a family in transition, but at this place where they can all blossom. And a place where they can all grow. And that is always informed by all the people that participate in these moving communities.

So first, there must be standards of safety that are met always that lead to develop trusting relationships with the child and the parents. The trust is critical, and we were not born, not everyone was born in a relationship where trust was alive. So, we take that into consideration especially at least in our program here in Houston. What we see is that our providers, our caregivers are not very distant from the socioeconomic status of our clients as they are. You know, yes, they receive a salary and sometimes they have benefits, but it's not always true.

So again, we want to be able to make sure that this environment meets the safety standards, that there is the ability to provide the ability for the adults to find their way, and that sometimes takes counseling to really get to this place where people can open up and hold a space for others, such as these families who are in traumatic states. So, we want to believe that the child, the parent, and the provider are competent and that the provider with all the support that we can give them, are ready and open to develop relationships.

Peter Mangione: Those are powerful statements relating to the child and the family as competent. And that's a shift because it's so easy to think about a family

in trauma or under stress, maybe in a living situation, which is different from our idea of home, that they still are competent, that they still are being very thoughtful. They're still working under situation, trying to make sense of it, trying to make meaning. Mary Jane, I'm gonna focus on the competence of the child, because you, when you talk about infants and toddlers just open up for us a deep understanding of what that competence looks like.

And when you think of a child making meaning in different kinds of contexts, different kinds of places with family and then coming into a program like Marcela described, how would you think about, describe, help us create an image of that competent child making meaning in this situation?

Mary Jane Fong:

You know, when I had a chance to work with both of you on this, in this discussion, I was just so excited because you know so much of how we think about the competent child within the context that Marcela just described for these families, what we're seeking is something very basic. Am I safe? Does this place feel good? And those two questions are running around in the mind of the baby and the family member with whom they are tied in this setting. And so, it really puts the responsibility on the provider of care, in this case I'm gonna call that person a teacher, to make sure that there's an environment set up where this baby feels safe.

That baby's not gonna feel safe unless the family member who opened the door and came in with that baby feels safe as well. And I always go back to an image that I first heard described by Carlina Rinaldi from the schools in Reggio Emilia. She described them, and I'll hold my fingers up here, a triangle of relationships. That the environment we establish in infant care is really a triangle of relationships. And there are three parties within this relationship. You can predict what they are. The baby, the family member, and the teacher. And there are three guiding principles that make that triangle strong. 'Cause I know PITC has always said it's all about relationships, right?

But we can also think about, there's three guiding principles. Each cares about the other and in turn feels cared for, right? Each is open to a sense of wonder, which is a willingness to be surprised. Ron Lally used to talk about that, right? And then, each trust that he or she will learn from the other. So, it's important for us to dwell on that for a second, because we often think about, oh yes, teachers are gonna teach children. Children are gonna learn from teachers. But what this tells us is that we as teachers are gonna learn a lot from being mindfully attentive to the baby.

And we often think of, we're gonna teach parents how to. But this reminds us that we have a lot to learn from the family member who walks in that door, so we need to be equally and mindfully attentive to that parent, because we have something to learn from them. So, those principles, I think have always helped me think about, how do we create this welcoming space that Marcela just described? How do we co-construct, as they would say in Reggio Emilia, again, a Carlina Rinaldi phrase that I heard. We co-construct our programs with our families.

And the reason we chose to focus on Marcela's, at least one of her centers today, and you'll see some images in a few seconds, is you'll see how, if you're thinking about a center that serves families in domestic violence situations, or situations where they are temporarily without a house or apartment and living in a shelter, then it's really important for us to realize that we need to be quick on our feet, because you never know who's gonna walk in that door the next day. And that's the beauty of what the teacher in this particular program that you're going to see. Those are the challenges that she faces every day when she's thinking about the environment that she creates. Marcela described it, she says, we're trying to create a soft place to fall. Beautiful.

Peter Mangione: Mary Jane, when you were talking about the triangle, a thought occurred to me that I don't think I ever had quite the clarity before. And that is that we all learn from each other in that triangle. But the other part, the thought that was new or maybe sharper than ever before is that every member of that triangle, the child, the parent, and the infant care teacher, cares for the others. That it is a caring relationship that's reciprocal that goes to each person. And that's the kind of relationship we want to create through that intentional, through that mindful intentionality you talk about. I find it's very moving, Marcela and Mary Jane, you already mentioned it, this idea of a soft space to fall. Marcela, would you tell us about it?

Marcela Clark: Sure, so we are going to be talking quite a bit and we will be showing you a few pictures of this particular location, it's a shelter for families who are victims of domestic violence. But what I do wanna tell you is that the concept from Reggio of the environment as the third teacher has played a tremendous role. I also want to tell you that it was a social worker and funder that after visiting our centers said to me, you have created a soft place to fall for all of these people who are part of this community. So, when we started our work, we did what we consider essential for any human being to feel welcome.

And so, you know, we use the principle that we do from early childhood, and we just wanted to create a place that it will be nice and a warm for children, parents, and providers. That triad that Jane described, and thank you Jane for that excellent description of that triangle, because it is so true. Those three components cannot function without each other. So, what we did is we ultimately define the soft place to fall that is really defined by the people who prepare the environment, keenly observe children's behaviors, and not only children but also the adult behaviors, in the setting, and then they create a place where everyone feels welcomed and loved.

And if you look at this picture, this room doesn't have windows. There is no natural light. This is a place where maximum security is the most important aspect of every day. There are several electric doors that you have to get through before you can actually get to the shelter where the children are housed or the people who are in the transitional area. If you look at these walls, they're cinder blocks. And if you look at the floor is concrete. It has been buffed and made somewhat soft, and then you start looking very carefully.

And in our conversations with Jane yesterday, we identified things that this extraordinary teacher has done, such as the different ways that she has brought in light, that also I think it serve as a symbol as she wants to bring in light in the life of these children and families. She has created multiple spaces for children to have the right to decide what they want to do. But at the same time, a small space is where they feel embraced, places that they make them feel comfortable. There is no dark spaces, there is a gentle light. She also makes sure to put fabric where the fluorescent lights are, because fluorescent lights are so harsh for the naked eye.

So, if you look there is a lot of an important concept that we utilize, that we learned from Reggio. We do a lot of documentation. Teachers spend extraordinary time documenting the child's life while they are in care. And we hear a story about a mom, they had gone to visit the classroom during the day and the teacher gived her documentation with the picture and the writing, her writing of what the child's day was like and what he was learning. And this mother, this battered woman said, "I was having a really bad day, but this has shifted my day "and I am feeling so much better now." So, that is a teacher that is competent. That is a teacher that knows what she needs to do, is a teacher that has observed the child but also has observed the parent.

And then she can capture that with pictures and words so the parent can identify themselves as competent, because we never take credit for what the child has learned, we give all the credit to the parents. We don't need the credit. And that really support competence in parents. Jane, do you want to add anything to this?

Mary Jane Fong:

I'll just echo so much of what you just described. This first slide, we have a series of about five photos. This first slide will give our participants a chance to kind of see an overview of this very small room that is dedicated to infants, up to young toddlers. And it's adjacent to a toddler room for older toddlers. Couple of things that I want to point out that create a sense of safety in this room. In other words, what are some of the design principles that this teacher has embraced, that create a sense of safety in the environment? As Marcela pointed out, you see a variety of little, small nooks, and we're gonna show you some closeups of those in a second, but it goes back to a principle that is described beautifully in one of the interviews with Loris Malaguzzi.

He says, "We should think about the environment, "the play space for children, as kind of like market stalls "at a farmer's market", right? And the person who's going to the market walks into the stall, views what's available, selects what they want, and engages in lively interaction. This is the way he describes it. I just love it. And so, it's a welcoming space that invites the person, in this case the baby, in to experience the wares and select as they wish what it is they want to explore, investigate. So, you can see that, the other principle I think is illustrated very well here is one that Louis Torelli, our colleague who is just a master at thinking about infant and toddler environments, he talks about identify where the pathways are.

First of all, know where the doors are, where people are coming and going, and make sure that the pathways go to and not through the play space. And this is one way that we preserve a sense of of seclusion. And by that, I mean, a sense of safety from the busyness of the surrounding environment. So, in the next slide what we're going to do is we've cropped out some of the bigger environments so you can really see a couple of these small nooks and begin to observe and look for all the ways that a teacher has, this teacher has tried to create a sense of seclusion, meaning, I am safe here, and I can pull away from the busyness of the surrounding environment if I feel like that's what I need to do to feel good, to feel safe.

And part of that is a sense of softness, you know, the fabric is used in very thoughtful ways to create that sense of space. And the other thing I

wanted to point out that what was also available in the bigger picture is there is a sense of order, but that order is meant to be turned into disorder by the children. That's an expected principle, that's something I learned early in my career from Dr. Betty Jones from Pacific Oaks College. She said, "You know the environment is being used "the way you want it to do when you begin to see clutter, "the messiness of play take over", 'cause children will create their own order.

And then it's up to the teacher, the provider to bring a sense of order back to create a sense of calm. And you clearly see this in the way the materials are organized in this space. And as Marcela said, "Children's see their images reflecting on the walls." So, that's another design principle, is how do we use the walls to allow them to speak to the children? In the next slide, you're going to see another example of in this small space, you know, nestled within cinder block walls, you clearly see them here, how the teacher has created another little place to escape to. And how the teacher has used, in this case it's the door into the toddler room which is usually closed as a place where children see their images reflected.

Marcela made a wonderful comment when we were discussing this session a couple of days ago about how children sometimes come back to the shelter. So, being able to see that their image is still there, you know, the footprint of their life having been in this safe place before. You also see a very thoughtful use of playful lighting, bringing in natural light. That overhead light you can see would be very obtrusive if you were a baby. And it's softened in so many ways by the fabric draped, but also that use of just the playful small twinkle lights. In the next slide, we're enchanted by what this teacher had done again with the natural light coming down.

But then adding those playful frons of some kind of soft material that can be manipulated, I would expect, if you're a young toddler. They can be reached for, if you're a crawler. They can be wondered at, if you're a baby who's placed nearby. I was also taken, you'll see to the left of this door, which is a door into a storage room, but on the other side is another door that people go in and out. The photographs, and in the next slide you'll see a closeup of the photos of the, oops, not yet. I guess we had another slide in here. Another example, actually let me talk a little bit more about lighting.

In the next slide you'll see another example of how teachers have used the rope lighting, hanging it on a piece of driftwood, and again making use of the higher spaces for babies who might be lying on the floor, exploring the light, the shadow coming at them, otherwise what would they see? You know this administrative paperwork board. So, I mean, this

teacher has done a masterful job camouflaging in many ways some of the harsher aspects of the environment. On the next slide is where I wanted to mention how sweet and available, accessible and intimate these photos are that reflect children's lives, children who have been in the program.

And it's also made available as something to hold, to touch, to experience. I think we have one more. I love this next slide coming up because here you see what this teacher has interpreted from one of the key principles that they use in the schools in Reggio Emilia. Is how do we, how do we create contexts for children to investigate, explore, experiment? And how do we create a sense of identity? Anyway, you'll notice in this space that those are reflective mirrors. Those are some little lightweight reflective balls. To the left, there are some tree rounds, both wide and small. And then what I thought was just so sweet, above on the shelf, there's a little wooden frame, which can be described as a provocation.

And it's a wonder, what might happen if we put those wooden rounds, small and large, next to some wooden frames? Will the children relate one to the other, and in essence kind of create their own puzzle, right? Or will they stack one on top of the other? And that becomes challenging when you get the small pieces. But in essence, what we're looking at here, is a set of blocks, right? These little wooden rounds. So, for those people who are concerned about counting the number of blocks in the environment, and as we sometimes do in early childhood programs, you know, to get a high score on an assessment tool.

Let me tell you, those wooden rounds make really good blocks and that little wooden frame and those pieces of wood that might fit within, makes a really good puzzle. And then the other thing is, notice the little bar for pulling up. So, this is a kind of space that could be used. I know some of you are working in programs where you have children, non-mobile, mobile crawlers as well as young toddlers sharing the same space. So, imagine the possibilities for children of each age with the materials that the teacher has assembled there.

Peter Mangione:

Oh, it's so much thought that the providers put into creating these spaces. Mary Jane, you're just opening our eyes up to seeing all the possibilities that the teachers consider. Marcela, as I'm looking at these spaces and the thought that they're co-created by the children and the providers and the parents. Could you describe how in this particular program, the teachers, the providers engage collaboratively with the children and the parents to create such wonderful environments?

Marcela Clark:

Sure, one of the areas that we pay lots of attention is the fact that these children are living in somewhat of a constant transition. And we want them to feel anchored. We want them to feel rooted in the environment where they are presently at. So, one of the things that these providers do, something that is very common in the practice where I live, is that teachers change the environment. I'm not talking about the program that I direct, but you know, I mean, I worked at a lab school 100 years ago and every Friday we were expected, this was at a community college, we were expected to change the environment for the following week. We change all the books. We change the setting, everything, the props.

Everything was changed. Well, thank goodness time has changed and we have learned to behave in different ways, but particularly for this population it is very important for the child to own the place, to feel that this is their home. This is their place of belonging. So, when the teacher has an idea about moving something, she does it with the children. When they're going to change something, they do it together. She gives them offerings, so the child's point of view is critical about what the environment looks like. And the teacher, one of the things that we spend lots and lots of time is supporting teachers developing observational skills so they can translate what they see into behaviors and settings.

And they see what the children are interested in. And this is not just, you know, the typical phrase that we use, we follow the children interests. This goes way beyond that. Children really own these places. And it makes such a difference in the way that children feel grounded in this environment. So, the child's point of view is critical, the child's right to choose what they want to engage with, and ultimately, we feel that our job is to protect the time the child is suspended with any given artifact or any given piece of equipment that might be in the room. So, our job is to slow time, slow down the time so children have this time to relish in what they're doing.

Peter Mangione:

It's a powerful idea that children own the place. It's not only following their interests, but it's really, how do you create together with the children a place that they own, that they have a sense of belonging in, that it really is a place for me. Mary Jane, you have shown us in your narrative of these environments already the possibilities and how children, how infants and toddlers have the potential for making meaning in every way they make meaning, whether it's physically, whether it's with words, whether it's with action, whether it's relating one thing to another.

And you have such a wonderful way of helping us see how children, when they actually inhabit these environments, express their sense of wonder, and we want environments that do that. And I was wondering if in the few minutes we have left, if you could share with us moments of wonder and talk about what they mean to you, what they mean to the children.

Mary Jane Fong: Yeah, I would love to, but you know, I'm gonna give all credit for that to Dr. Ron Lally, who really gave us the idea that we had, I think he stated it something like this, you know, we're undergoing a revolution in terms of thinking about curriculum now, we now need to think about... With very young children we need to think about creating context for learning. What do we put in a play space? How do we invite them to be active participants during all the daily routines? How do we mindfully respect their understanding of these everyday interactions and conversations?

And here today, we're focusing a lot on the play space, and one of the things that I always go to, when I'm thinking about, what do we put in the play space that creates this sense of wonder? I always go to two things, ordinary objects and natural materials, because we need to preserve children's relationship with nature, especially when they're in the confines of cinder block walls and under fluorescent lights, behind locked doors, right? So, we have a couple of photos just to kind of provoke us all to think about, what is the kind of ordinary objects and natural materials that you might put in an infant-toddler play space.

You're gonna see these, each one will show for about four seconds, but just we want you to wonder, how did these create context for learning? That's a worm compost bin in a toddler, in an infant yard, young infant yard. So, perhaps Peter, in answer to your question, that leaves us all wondering of, what might we add to the play space to invite infants and toddlers to be scientists, to be creators, to be inventors, because what we do, if there's one fact we we've learned from all the research on infant development over the last 20, 30 years, is that babies are a lot smarter than we ever thought. A lot smarter.

In fact, they have more, what you might say, consciousness in every moment of time than we do as adults. We lose that as we age. So, we have to really respect the power of babies, infants and toddlers to make meaning with the materials that we put in the play space. And most commercial toys, I think really, really speak down to infants and toddlers, and they're just so much more that they can draw from something like a metal colander, you know.

Peter Mangione: We began this conversation focusing on a program that really started with the idea that we needed to establish safety for children and safe through our relationships with the child and with the parent in that triangle and creating a soft place to land or to fall. A soft place to fall. And as this conversation has evolved and you've shown the environments, I can feel that safety and security, that sense of belonging, but I also feel like you're relating to the whole child, that it's every part of that child and that all children, all infants and toddlers have this capacity to wonder.

And whatever we're doing programmatically, we want to create every possibility for that meaning making, for that creativity, for the problem solving. All those things that children are naturally going to engage in if they're in a place that's truly for them. We could go on, and you give us such a richness and help us visualize, both of you, what the experience is like, what the place is like and how it becomes a place that children own. We wanted to give the audience a chance to ask us some questions, and I'm going to invite my colleague, Arlene Paxton, who directs the PITC Regional Support network in California She's been gathering our questions, with your questions. And we have a few minutes here to respond to at least two or three of them.

Arlene Paxton: Thank you, Peter. And thank you, Mary Jane and Marcela, for such a rich conversation about environments. As you can imagine, we've got several questions in the Q&A as well as a few that came in before the event. We will do our best to respond to as many as we can, knowing we just have a limited amount of time. I'm gonna start with one that came in before we started our conversation. And this participant is asking, Mary Jane, and I think I might start with you. Setting up the environment in a family childcare setting aimed at building relationships amongst the various ages.

Mary Jane Fong: Yeah, I saw that question came in before, during the registration process. And I've thought about that a little bit, and you know, I would begin by saying, we wanna protect every child in that community, in that room, so that they experience a sense of safety. 'Cause you're not gonna move on and learn some of the more, you know, what we call the more complex concepts unless you feel safe in a place. So, babies who are not yet mobile, we need to be mindful of, we may need to create possibilities for them to pursue their play without being interrupted by the walking, walkers or crawlers.

And I'm thinking one of the little nooks that we saw, where it was sort of the little alcove and with the soft space below. I was thinking, if I was a teacher in that room, I'd have available a little, you know, just like sturdy

cardboard box that I could sort of gently pull over and put in front. If there were times when I wanted to create a sense of seclusion for that baby, so that you're creating the possibility for crawlers to be in that space or engaged in that space. But you may wanna feel secure in knowing that that baby is not feeling threatened in any way by the other children.

But then I also thought about some of the objects in Rose's room, the classroom that we just saw. And I thought in terms of, so many of those spaces were excellent for a baby to pull up to standing and be adjacent to a child who is already walking and still have a baby lying who's not yet mobile over to the side. I think my experience in being in family childcare homes that have served multiple ages, infants through preschool aged children, is that, first of all I think safety, and you have to be a lot more cognizant of the size of things that are left out in the environment, so that you don't have anything that would fit inside a toilet paper roll that could, like a lot of some of the small Legos, some of the small play parts, pencils, plastic spoons forks, those kind of things then can't really be left out in a play space.

So, I've talked a lot about "Nos", things not to do, I've realized, but there are so many things. If we adopt that lens, there's still so much more that we can have in the space, play space, like cardboard boxes, bowls, tubes, cardboard tubes, containers with tops can be used for pretend play, but they can also be used just for babies who are just grabbing. I've been putting different kinds of herbs in little flannel bags that are kind of tightly secured, and they can be used by a baby who is just learning how to grasp things, but they can also be used as a pancake by a three-year-old, you know, who's making pancakes in a little pretend kitchen area.

So, as long as you begin to work through a lens of safety and non-toxicity, obviously that's true for all age children, but safety with infants and toddlers and preschool-aged children. I think the world opens up. And if you keep mindful of the fact that you can use ordinary objects, they have much more variety of uses than some of the commercially produced toys.

Arlene Paxton:

Thank you. I'm gonna have Marcela speak to this next question, which is actually kind of a combination of several questions, but in the photographs that you shared, we saw beautiful hanging sheets, ways to soften light, many things. And we know that there's a little bit of a tension in the field, I'm gonna say the field, around licensing regulations for some of those things as well as even assessments, you know, ITERS or ECERS or some of the well-known... You know, there's a tension there about wanting to do some of those things, but the feeling that some

regulations don't allow us, so to speak. How do you handle that in your program?

Marcela Clark:

All right. Well, thank you for asking that question. It's a very important question. This program will be 20 years old next year, and it has taken 20 years to get where we are today. So, all those beautiful things that we know that work, and that we mindfully create and plan the environment, they're not really a hazard. We have relationships with childcare licensing. They send their people to do their practicum in our centers. So, we ask them questions and they ask us questions and we come together. One of the biggest problems that I have always seen in our field is that we work in silos.

So, my mission and my team's mission has always been to get rid of the barriers and to respect other people's opinions. There is a reason why they are concerned, but if we really invite people in and they see how we live, we are okay. We have done tremendous amount of pro bono work at the state level, we always present at the Texas AEYC. We do two consecutive days, and we present these ideas, and our intention is not to convert anyone, our intention is to expose everyone that things can be different.

That it doesn't cost money, is a lot more costly to go to some of the people that have their organizations, their businesses in your backyard, who I dearly love, and that at some point in my life I did have, you know, business with them, but we really, is much more expensive to buy from Lakeshore and Kaplan than it is to go to the recycling center. You have to make, develop relationships with the people in the community. We have people that bring things to our doors saying, I have this box of these tubes, and I know that you can figure out something to do with them. They're amazing.

And you know, it's extraordinary what you can get from the community. And all of that was learned in one of the trips to Italy, to Reggio, because that's what they do. They don't have the really polished things that other the adults think children and teachers need, you know, they're natural. They have furniture that would be somewhere in a home. So, I would say really, really invest in your relationships with your community, because they will be your best advocates. I hope that answered the question, because I can talk about this all day long.

Arlene Paxton:

For me it did, you know I was just thinking, and Peter, I don't know if you wanted to add anything, but you know, I will say in PITC it's all about relationships, right? And when we talk about that, it's teacher, child,

family, community, licensing, the extended community as well as those relationships as we can engage in conversation to help people understand why we may be doing something and what we're hoping to accomplish, right?

Mary Jane Fong: Can you imagine what that room would have been like if there had been no softness, because there were multiple layers of fabric that were actually protecting those babies from the fluorescent lighting. And I know PITC has looked very carefully at what are the safety and conditions around air quality, lighting, et cetera. But you know, when it comes to actually having that conversation with the person who's saying no, it's so important to remember what Marcela just said. We need to become advocates for our children's right to have a relationship with the world of nature.

We have to advocate for them to preserve their understanding of the natural world. And so, it's easy for people to say, "Oh, you can't do a water play." Or "My goodness, you've got metal pots out there at the yard "aren't they gonna cut themselves on the edge?" And you know, we are professionals we know how to screen things for safety. And then we have that conversation. So, I was delighted, I was really thrilled when I looked at the participant list, we have a fair number of people who work in the role of licensing analysts. So, perhaps this is a great way to begin that conversation. I know I'm from California, at least here in California. That's wonderful, that's exciting to have you here, yeah.

Peter Mangione: And the thought, it's all in the home. It made me think of home-based childcare, Marcela, that these possibilities are available to people providing care in their home. That natural world, the things that are there, the simple things that can be created. And then if providers were to network and connect with their community, they could get that kind of support too that you described that your program has gained through your connections to the community.

Marcela Clark: Yeah. Absolutely. And if one day we have more time, we will show you our playgrounds, that with very little money, we can create this paradise. You know, it just doesn't cost a lot of money. We have just been trained to believe that we need to spend all this money on things that we don't necessarily need. I know that we're on time, but there was a question that is really important. Someone asked about the funding, and you need to know, number one, the program has been funded through ExxonMobil for the last 19 years. They have been extremely generous.

I had serious conversations with myself whether I wanted to take the money from Exxon, but then I decided I can put that money to good use, okay? Because I'm very much attuned to ecology, and I know the damage is bad done to this earth. But Exxon mobile has been really... They said, we're gonna fund this program for three years so you can figure it out. Their big question was, how can you retain staff? The president of ExxonMobil at that time was very concerned because, and you know, I'm talking about 15 years ago, he was very concerned about the fact that the labor force is being diminished and diminished and diminished and where they were gonna get their workers.

So, they wanted us to develop a program that it was going to create scientists. And they knew, and they understood that the research at that time, and it still holds through, was that children needed to have a consistent caregiver, continuity of care, as Ron and Peter will have said, right? And as things sometimes work magically in life, at the end of the third year all these suits from ExxonMobil came to tour the centers. And the guy with the big deep pockets was there, and somehow, we were at a homeless shelter and this toddler took his picture, ran to this man, and this was not staged. Ran to this man, hugged him and gave him his picture.

His last name was Green. Mr. Green. He was so touched by the action of this toddler. That toddler secured funding for this program forever. As he walk out, he says, "Marcela, I'm going to make sure "that this become a budget item "so you don't have to be concerned "about the next three years or the next 10 years, "this will be forever." And what I can tell you in this program, we have never concerned ourselves with outcomes, because when you do the right thing, the outcomes come along, and I can talk another 10 hours about the outcomes and the research that has been done, the evaluation.

But I can tell you, if you do the right thing, the outcomes will follow. And now people approach us. They want to be connected to the United Way Bright Beginnings Program of Houston, because they know that if they give us money, their name is attached to a program that has produced outcomes. We sell through ITERS, ECERS, Class, the Devereux, you name it. So again, you do the right thing, everything falls into place. Thank you so much for listening

Peter Mangione: That's a really wonderful thought. You do the right thing, everything falls into place. And your passion is so strong Marcela. It really enriches conversations like the one we just had. You know, a conversation like this with Mary Jane and Marcela, has inspired us at PITC. And as I said, we've

learned as much from you as you have from us. And part of that inspiration is that we're actually taking a big step with the program for infant and toddler care. And we are going to launch a curriculum, a relationship-based approach to curriculum very soon, which we're very excited about.

But it's the kinds of thoughts that you, over the years and all of you in the field and the other conversations that we've shared, that have really gone into this curriculum. We really look forward to sharing it with everyone and seeing if we can contribute to what you're doing in your programs. Thank you both for joining us. It's been such a wonderful conversation, a very rich conversation. It's left me with many, many thoughts. And I think what it says to me is, we have to keep having conversations, there's more to learn. Thank you.

Mary Jane Fong: Thank you. Thank you both.