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Episode 43: Supporting Caregivers with Intentional Development of Early Literacy and Early Numeracy in Young Learners

Becky: Welcome listeners! We have a great show for you today! But before we get started, I wanted to fill you in on an exciting change. Starting today my colleague, Samantha Statler, will be joining me as a regular co-host on the show and at times will likely be hosting solo. Sam, welcome to the show. I am honored that you are taking on the task of being my co-host.

Sam: I am excited to be here and to join the podcast team on a more regular basis!

Becky: I am really pumped for our episode today. Our focus for this episode is centered on school readiness.

Sam: Becky, me too! School readiness is critical to the work that we do as a part of the WV Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. We know that even before children enter our buildings and classrooms, they are developing skills that will be vital for reading development as well as academic success.

Becky: Absolutely, Sam! So, today our colleague, Brandie Turner, is here to help us with our conversation today. Brandie, welcome back to the show!

Brandie: Thank you, Becky! I feel like it has been ages since I've had the opportunity to join you so I'm thrilled to be here today to focus on another school readiness topic.

Becky: I agree it feels like it's been a while. So, the last time we were together we were discussing the importance of building foundational interactions to support child development through building trusting relationships with children and incorporating executive functioning skills through everyday activities. I know this is a personal passion of yours as a mother of a toddler, but also a professional passion to help support family engagement in our schools and communities.

Brandie: Yes, it really does tick each of the roles I play in life. Today what I wanted to do was extend our last conversation out to include how early literacy and numeracy are intertwined and how both play such a vital role in educational development and also to discuss how we can encourage families to integrate these concepts into everyday play activities.

Sam: I couldn't agree more that both early literacy and early numeracy both play an important role in developing the minds of our young children. I'm so glad that you pointed out that they are intertwined. I think most people don't realize how connected they really are. Most people would consider them being two completely separate concepts.

Becky: Right, with that in mind, maybe we should back up and explain what we mean by early literacy and early numeracy so that we are all on the same page about what we mean by the two concepts and also so that our listeners can make a better connection between the two.

Sam: Great idea! Early literacy refers to the development of skills needed to prepare a child to read. Language development, expression, vocabulary, speaking, and listening to name a few. Early numeracy includes the skills that help develop numerical understanding. So we're talking about spatial language like up, down, behind and quantitative language such as more, less, and so on. Also, the skill of sorting or categorizing and recognizing shapes and patterns.

Brandie: Thank you for clarifying those for us, Sam. The ideal approach is to teach the concepts in a more integrated approach, especially at a young age but too often I still see toys and resources for parents separating out the abc's and 1,2,3's. I read an article the other day that I shared with you that talked about the literacy and math domains. Which basically refers to the outcomes or the goals. In this article the authors quote research that supports this. I want to read it exactly so the power behind the words stay in tact. It's from a resource titled "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8" that suggests that Young children "...learn best when the concepts, language, and skills they encounter are related to something they know and care about, and when the new learnings are themselves interconnected in meaningful, coherent ways." (Copple and Bredekamp 2009, 21)

Becky: What is astounding to me is that I think we all learn best through making connections and integrating concepts.

Sam: lol...I know, Becky, but we'll have to save that conversation for another day because we could talk all day about that!

Becky: I guess so...What I love about the article is it shares how both early literacy and numeracy are naturally connected because both include spoken and written language. Reading this article helped me make a solid connection between the two. Both concepts are grounded in the foundation of oral language through conversations and vocabulary development.

Sam: Right, Becky! As educators we know the importance of supporting oral language development in the early years. One thing that really stood out to me in this article that I feel is important to mention is that just like letters are symbols that represent meaning, so are numbers, shapes, and other mathematical symbols.

Brandie: You are both spot on. Isn't it amazing just how connected they are once you take time to sit and consider the intricacies? What I am proud to say is that I believe with the support of WV's Universal PreK program that many of our children are provided the opportunity to engage in this integrated approach to literacy and numeracy at least starting in preschool. However, my concern is that families isolate out the concepts at home. The last years in education that many family members remember are middle school, high school, and potentially college. And at those levels, these concepts were not taught in a connected way. You had English class, math class, history, etc. So I'm afraid that's the structure that many families use when engaging their young children in learning...let's practice our letters, now let's practice our numbers.

Becky: I think you're right, Brandie! When I think back to before my girls started school, I wanted to give them the best start possible. So, I would sit down with them to do just that, work on letter and number identification. We of course would engage in different ways too when it came to developing oral language, but it was never intentional or thought-out like when I sat down with them to work with letters and numbers.

Brandie: You know what, it is so easy to fall into compartmentalizing the two. You mentioned earlier that I have a 2-year-old. I know firsthand how hard it is to make time to consider developing these skills and it's easy to just buy this toy or that activity and most of the time it's this or that, it's literacy or math focused. Obviously, those oral language skills and vocabulary exposure can be developed no matter the toy or activity if the child has someone to interact with them as they are engaging in play. I'm afraid, however, that the children who need this oral language development the most aren't getting that interaction so all they have is what the toy itself teaches them. This is where the concepts are isolated. I know the toys my son has at home are things like shape sorters and abc puzzles, color games, etc.

Sam: Yes, I have found that I have to be super intentional about the hands on toys I buy my three year old because I do feel like they are either literacy focused or numeracy focused. It is hard to find ready-made activities that encourage both. I think this is why so much of the research suggests that the best way to develop early literacy and early numeracy is through a play-based approach that expands on real-world interactions. Providing opportunities for children to use both sets of skills in a meaningful way like dramatic play with the pretend kitchen or playing with toy cars or blocks.

Brandie: Absolutely, and that's why we see in many daycares and preschools that they have an area for dramatic play that might include dress up and a kitchen. Sometimes, too you'll see providers have a post office set up to encourage children to "write" letters or send cards. The block area is also a great opportunity to encourage both literacy and numeracy. Most people wonder how that might be, but if you add additional materials in the block area like pictures of local buildings then children can use the blocks to replicate those buildings. Another idea is to add character figurines from common nursery rhymes so children can re-create the setting and tell the story in their own way.

Sam: These are great ideas that I think families can also incorporate at home. I also like how the article breaks down some suggested activities by different developmental ages. So for infants it suggests that families and providers model literacy and numeracy language by talking to the infant about what they are doing and what they are seeing. For instance, during cuddle time talking about their

fingers and toes and counting them. This builds their understanding of body parts as well as introduces them to 1-1 correspondence.

Brandie: Yes, and just taking the opportunity to look at pictures, posters, or toy animals and talk about what colors you see, what animals you see, and maybe being intentional about using descriptive words. So instead of just saying...I see an elephant, describe the elephant. I see a big elephant with a long trunk.

Becky: Right, Brandie! Being more intentional about the word that we use and being more descriptive will go a long way to support the oral language development of our youngest learners. And these same strategies can be used with toddlers as well, but we want to increase the vocabulary we use. So, trying to build in that spatial language we talked about earlier and describing where things are. For instance, playing a game where you “hide a toy” in plain sight and when the child finds it describing where it is...“the toy is under the table”.

Brandie: Absolutely, I agree that families don't have to worry too much about knowing all of the strategies that can be used...just taking the time to talk to children and use more descriptive words will help build that language and vocabulary development. Books are also a wonderful tool to use for all ages. Keeping several books available for young children to engage with either independently or with a family member can help build both literacy and numeracy skills. Many of the conversations we just suggested can be done when looking at the pictures in a book. My son loves to sit and look at books. I noticed that he has started to point to the pictures, mimicking what I do when we sit together and attempts to say what the picture is. He isn't always right, but he has the right idea!

Sam: I know that books are also a favorite for my daughter, Honora. And this might be a shameless plug, LOL, but on top of me purchasing books for her, she is signed up for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, where she receives one free book a month, and this program is free to all in the state of WV for children birth to 5 years of age. So if families or caregivers struggle to purchase books for their children this would be a great program to get their children signed up for. I also really like taking trips to our local libraries with my daughter and exploring the books they offer there as well.

Becky: One of the major differences between how we engage infants and toddlers compared to preschoolers is that we want to give preschoolers lots of opportunities to respond to questions and time for them just to talk. Giving them choice will encourage them to respond to a question, and asking them to describe their block structure or drawing helps encourage them to use descriptive words.

Sam: Yes, this is also the time to incorporate more toys that represent everyday objects like math tool (rulers, measuring cups, etc.) Creating routines in the classroom where they must answer a question of the day by either writing their name under their answer choice or graphing their answer on a class chart also helps build in those developing skills in a meaningful way.

Brandie: right and again, families can do the same at home. Creating a bedtime routine chart together will help the child take ownership of what bedtime should look like. One of my friends uses a dinner choice menu with her children where she puts a picture of two dinner choices on the fridge every morning and her children write their name under the dinner they want to have that night. It's normally just the side items so the main course doesn't have to be different but she might make peas for one child and broccoli for the other.

Becky: I love that idea! I need to do this with my teenager! Lol....

Sam: I know, right, lol.

Becky: Seriously, though that is a great way to encourage choice and develop literacy skills. I guess you could also switch it up and put it in graph form to encourage numeracy skills as well.

Brandie: For sure.

Sam: So, I know today that you wanted to focus on the connection between early literacy and early numeracy as well as how to partner with families to develop those skills. I feel like we've done a great job at making the connection between the two concepts and also talking about how we can encourage children to develop the concepts both at home and in a childcare setting, but I don't know that we've actually talked about how we can support families.

Brandie: No, you're right, Sam. We really haven't targeted how to actually support families in building these skills at home other than giving some ideas.

Becky: This is likely going to be a topic that we continue our discussion on during the next episode, but let's talk a little bit about how providers can support families before we end our discussion today.

Brandie: Of course. I think what we need to consider before providing any support is what home life is like for the families that we engage with. For instance, if I'm a daycare teacher and I know that most of the families in my class have adults that work outside of the home then what I suggest for them might be different than what I might suggest if one parent is able to stay home or only works part-time. Also knowing whether there are other siblings in the home and if those siblings are older or younger...siblings are a great way to encourage back-and-forth play, language development, and so much more if provided the appropriate activities.

Becky: That's a good point, Brandie. I know when I had my first daughter that I was able to spend more time with her when she was young because I didn't have to split my attention between two children.

Brandie: Exactly. So first, I suggest having a framework for the types of activities to provide. Then, I would be sure to keep it simple. Don't overcomplicate the suggestions. Use simple language so that families can model that language for their children. Use simple directions. If the directions are too complicated, then families will immediately disengage or figure it out on their own. Just like when you buy a piece of furniture like a bookshelf that you must put together...What we don't want is for parents to figure it out on their own because they may or may not know have the background or skills to make the activity developmentally appropriate. Lastly, for now, I would suggest materials that families already have at home. Don't add an extra expense or an extra chore of going to the store. Everyday household items will also build that vocabulary and expose children to those items in a repetitive, natural way.

Sam: Those are great suggestions, Brandie. I think we can wrap up today knowing that we have provided some general suggestions for how to support families. In the next episode we will talk more about how we might be able to support childcare providers, organizations, and schools in building their family engagement opportunities. But before we go, reflecting on everything that we

talk about today, what is one tip or piece of advice that you would give our listeners about where to start when it comes to supporting families?

Brandie: Great question, Sam. Like I mentioned before, I think in order to support families we need to put ourselves in their shoes. It's easy to provide services for what WE think they need, but it may not be what they actually need at the moment or what they're ready for.