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Episode 47: Strengthening School Readiness Skills from Infancy

Becky Lewis: Hello listeners and thank you for joining us. Samantha Statler, I don't know about you, but I am excited about the topic that we are getting ready to discuss.

Samantha Statler: Yes, Becky Lewis. I am looking forward to our conversation today and I know that our listeners are going to enjoy this discussion as well. Today we are going to be focused on the school readiness component of the WVCGLR and it's not just a component of our campaign work but it's also the reason behind the WVDE ready, set, go initiative. Just a reminder to our audience, the ready set go framework defines school readiness not as ensuring that children are ready for school, but rather ensuring that families, schools, communities, and the state are ready to meet the individual needs of children. And part of that is providing resources to encourage increased public understanding of developmental milestones in the early years.

Becky Lewis: That was an excellent reminder, Samantha Statler! Thank you so much! So, as you alluded to in our conversation, this episode is going to focus on how children develop early learning milestones from birth to 12 months. This topic is critical because it directly connects to the third-grade achievement gap. In episode 25, Brandie Turner and I discussed the importance of building foundational interactions to support child development. We talked at a high level about the different milestones from birth to age 5 and how the early educators, especially those in pre-K and kindergarten settings, build on these milestones.

Learning to read is built on a foundation of language skills that begins at birth. This is a complicated and amazing process, and most children are able to develop certain skills as they move through the early stages of learning language. A piece of research that I want to share with you that was conducted by Moon, Cooper, and Fifer, revealed that infants who are only two days old are able to recognize and show preference for their native language.

Samantha Statler: Wow Becky Lewis! I never consider the fact that language development began that soon after birth. I think that this along with what we know about oral language development in the early years as a strong indicator of later academic achievement highlights the importance of supporting all children from infancy in meeting those early learning milestones.

Becky Lewis: Absolutely Samantha Statler! Before we get further into this conversation I want to welcome and introduce a new voice to the show, one of our new early and elementary learning specialists, Kerri Templeton. Kerri Templeton, welcome to the show and we are so happy to have you here to be a part of this discussion.

Kerri Templeton: Thanks, friends. I am thrilled to be on the show with you all and look forward to our conversation today.

Samantha Statler: Yes, welcome Kerri Templeton! Since this is your first time on the West Virginia leaders of literacy podcast, would you mind telling our listeners a little about yourself and your journey in education up to this point?

Kerri Templeton: I have a truly diverse background in education that includes the time I have spent serving as a special education teacher, third grade teacher, and gifted intervention specialist. I have served the last three years prior to coming on board here as an elementary assistant principal and principal. I have such a passion for education and love sharing this passion with others!

Becky Lewis: Thank you for sharing that with us, Kerri Templeton, and let me just say how happy I am that you joined us in our work to support the WVCGLR!

So, let's focus back on our topic today which is focused on infants from birth to age 12 months and how they learn to develop school readiness skills. The resource you shared with us was from the organization *Zero to Three* and provides a lot of insight on how infants develop school readiness skills such as language and literacy, thinking skills, and self-confidence.

Kerri Templeton: Right, Becky Lewis. I thought this was an important resource to share with our audience because it is a great reminder that it is never too early to begin developing these skills. This is also a resource that teachers could share with their families if they know they have little ones at home. It is super user

friendly and has a lot of information around several topics such as: early development and well-being, early learning, parenting, and policy and advocacy.

It has been several years since my children were this age, but it is important for me as an educator to remember that through those important early learning skills that children get their start through those everyday moments between infants and adults and support others with this understanding as well. The idea of babies and toddlers talking, having that back-and-forth conversation, and reading seems incredible, but language and literacy skills start from birth.

Samantha Statler: Kerri Templeton you are absolutely right! As a first-time mom of a now three-year-old, it has been an amazing journey to just watch my daughter grow. When Honey was just an infant, I would sit in amazement at how she would communicate with sounds and facial expressions, and even use different gestures. And something for our listeners to keep in mind is that it isn't necessary to "teach" infants through formal classes and activities, but just through that day-to-day interaction with them is where they will soak up information like a sponge.

Kerri Templeton: That is so true, Samantha Statler. It is through those everyday moments with your child that they will pick up on those early language and literacy skills. For example, reading books to them, talking to them, and especially laughing and just playing together. Children are going to pick up on language when you talk to them and they communicate back to you, by hearing stories read and songs sung aloud. Give your little ones the chance to explore books and other written resources like magazines, restaurant menus, newspapers, etc.

Becky Lewis: Thanks for sharing those ideas, Kerri Templeton. I want to shift our attention to the resources from *Zero to Three* and share with our listeners some activities to help those infants from 0-12 months grow those language and literacy skills.

One of the first things you can do is use books as part of your infant's daily routine. Maybe you read a book before naptime or bedtime. You can even get books that are waterproof that can be used in the bath or anytime you are playing with water. And you can also pack a book with you when you are running errands and let your little one hold onto it, and you can pull it out and read it to them

while you're waiting for an appointment or have a few minutes of down time between errands.

Samantha Statler: Yes, Becky Lewis, give me all the books (LOL) I have a natural love for reading and might even consider myself to be a book hoarder so buying books for my daughter was always something I enjoyed. And I have to remind out listeners, if you are in WV, we are now state wide with our Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which means little ones from birth to age 5 can receive 1 free book a month, so if you aren't sure you can purchase books as often as you'd like, I highly suggest you check out registering your child for this or any children that fall in that age range.

Becky Lewis: We love supporting DPIL and all of the great resources it offers families and if you want to get your hands on more books, thrift stores and yard sales are also really great places to look. Even looking for a free little library can provide some texts for you to get for your little one.

Kerri Templeton: So other than just having books around your home for your infant, another recommendation is read to your child or the children that you are working with and that while you are reading you are using different voices for different characters and reading with expression. I know from personal experience with my children, nieces, and nephews that little one's love when adults can tap into that silly-ness. It really makes the listening experience more exciting and engaging for them.

Samantha Statler: You really make a great point there, Kerri Templeton, when you mention reading with different voices for different characters. My little girl has even picked up on that whenever we are playing dress up or makeup believe together, I think of Cinderella because that has been a favorite of hers lately, any time she is the wicked stepmother, she talks a lot louder and with a very stern tone of voice which just shows that our little ones are picking up on these things.

Something else that is important for us to do is to let our infants read in their own way. When Honora was younger, she uses to only want to sit and listen to me read for thirty seconds or so and the teacher in me really struggled with that because I wanted to finish the book and I wanted her to want me to finish the book, but I learned to follow her lead to keep that reading time as positive as possible.

Becky Lewis: I think that children and adults of any age enjoy it when a reader makes a book come alive using voices and dramatic expressions. I know that I do! Kerri Templeton, what is another idea that the resource talks about?

Kerri Templeton: Well Becky Lewis, a simple activity with a little bit of prep work that a caregiver or parent can do with the children in their care to help promote language and literacy is to make a picture album. You could get some pictures printed of your child and some of the important people in his/her life and label them by their name. You could hole punch the pictures and tie them together with string or yarn. Your little one will love seeing pictures of the people they love and hear you talk about. You could even add in family pets or places that your child visits often to widen that range of vocabulary you are using with them.

Samantha Statler: What a great idea! I love the idea of just tying the pictures together, not necessarily gluing them down- this really gives them the freedom to carry it around and look at them.

This reminds me of another great activity from this site, which is singing, and teaching finger play songs. These are songs that have hand movements that go along with them. These finger plays really help infants develop muscle strength and coordination in their fingers which helps them later learn how to draw and write. One of my favorites is the classic Pat-a-cake song, but I also really like the Where is thumbkin and even the wheels on the bus.

Becky Lewis: My favorite finger play song that I would sing when my girls were little was “where is thumbkin?” I can remember them smiling and giggling while also trying to wiggle their fingers with me. What is most important about these activities is that you make them fun for both you and your infant. It is also important to keep in mind that literacy is a process that builds overtime. It is never too early to start reading to your baby and to instill that love for reading and language.

I think all of these activities that we have shared in discussed so far come together to help support a crucial school readiness skill which is the development of self-confidence and children have to feel safe and secure to be able to develop this. Of course, when we are reading, playing, and singing to infants we are inevitably helping to develop that feeling of safety and security. What is interesting is that research says that babies who are more confident and freely explore and learn

are those infants that are in an environment in which they have a loving adult that is there for them. When your baby crawls off on their own to check something out, wait for them and serve as that “home base” in case they were to need you. And being confident also makes it easier for babies to later move into those school settings and they are able to carry that sense of security you have provided for them wherever they go, even when you aren’t with them.

Kerri Templeton: Right, Becky Lewis, helping infants to establish that sense of security is so important. You help develop that sense of safety and security with infants when you respond to their cries and other communications; for example, picking them up if they need to be comforted, or getting a toy down for them if they are pointing to it and making noises. Giving lots of attention and affection to infants really helps establish that strong bond between you that makes them feel safe enough to begin to move away from you and explore little by little. This moving away demonstrates that the infants in your care have learned to trust you and that trust helps to give them confidence.

Samantha Statler: Yes, Kerri Templeton, and to just add to that, we want our babies to feel good about themselves and in their abilities to do things. Babies learn that “I can do it” feeling when they succeed at something or develop a new skill. I can picture that little grin Honey used to get when she pushed the right button on a toy to get it to play a song she liked. And I was always right there to just reaffirm her actions and tell her what a great job she did. Babies develop a positive sense of self-esteem and self-confidence through the play and interactions they have with adults in their love. Reflecting that message of “You worked so hard, you are so brave, you make me laugh” and so on, are all statements or phrases our babies need to hear to help them continue to develop that sense of self.

Kerri Templeton: I know sometimes as a parent it can be easier to just complete the task for your infant if you see them struggling, but we want our children to develop into good problem-solvers. Samantha Statler, I would love to know if your thoughts on how we can as caregivers provide that support our infant might need instead of just doing it for them?

Samantha Statler: Well, Kerri Templeton, this is something that I feel all new caregivers' wonder. I know in the Zeros to Three resource that we have been

referencing today, they have a section on this. One way to support infants who are struggling to solve an issue is to provide hands on support to help your child complete something, maybe like helping them push the block into the right hole or supporting them as they are working on standing up. It is also important to make sure you are doing activities that are just enough of a challenge. You want your infant to be interested but also within their ability to master whatever it is they are doing. And lastly, providing that emotional support by facial expressions and words to encourage your baby as they are working on a task. Just share in that joy with them when they succeed and be encouraging when needed.

Kerri Templeton: Those are some great shares, Samantha Statler. The one that really resonated with me was the last bit you shared about being an emotional support. Our words matter so much. The more encouraging words we pour into our children, the more confident they are going to be. So even though that may not seem like a big task for caregivers to take on, the lasting effects of it are beyond worth it.

Becky Lewis: Absolutely, our reactions matter. Children learn by watching and imitating the important people in their lives, which is first and foremost, ourselves, in this specific conversation. When you go with your child into a new situation or place, they watch you to see how you react. If you are calm, confident, and happy, this lets your child know that it is a safe place and situation for them. So, think about times you do have to separate from your child. They are more likely to feel safe and adjust to your absence if you leave them with a big hug and tell them in an upbeat, positive tone that they are going to have a great day. If they see you crying or upset, that is going to make them feel uneasy. So, continue to be aware of your reactions and model how to cope in different situations.

Kerri Templeton: That's totally correct, Becky Lewis! And there are lots of ways that you can also help an infant with their thinking skills. As I'm sure you know, all children but especially infants, make sense of the world around them through exposure to activities and their interactions with trusted adults.

Samantha Statler: Yes, Kerri Templeton, and I know that babies also are learning through their senses. So, knowing these two things, Kerri Templeton what are

some strategies and tips that you read about from our resource that you can share with our listeners to help families support their child's thinking skills?

Kerri Templeton: Well, for one, you can encourage curiosity in your infant. One way to do this is to offer objects that have different textures and materials. For example, you could offer your child a wooden spoon and a metal spoon and allow them to explore the differences between these two spoons. Or you could let the baby feel two different pieces of fabrics –one furry and one bumpy. This allows them to use their senses in a way that encourages that curiosity and thinking skills we just talked about. As the caregiver, model the way these objects are touched in a different way. You may rub the fur, but only pat the bumpy fabric. Babies love to imitate, and it teaches them that there is a different reaction between two items.

Becky Lewis: That's a great idea. I like how these are just common items that you could find in the household. You don't have to buy anything special to encourage their curiosity.

Kerri Templeton: Right. And there are other ways to encourage curiosity that are simple. One idea is to go on a quote-on-quote touching walk where you simply go on a walk and have the child touch different objects such as a bumpy tree bark or a crunchy leaf. And while you are having the infant touch these objects, keep talking with them about the different objects and the feelings.

Samantha Statler: True, and I bet you could also do a hearing walk where you listen and discover sounds and noises. While you are hearing these sounds, identifying them out loud for the infant would be so important, too.

Kerri Templeton: Absolutely! By encouraging curiosity through discovering differences in objects, you are developing these thinking skills. I remember my daughter loved to be a part of discovering what sounds objects made in the kitchen. She often would bang on different pots and pans and laugh as she was coming across the different noises. She would just light up when doing this and loved making sense of her world independently. Though I might have a headache at the end, I'm kidding, I know she was conducting her own problem-solving experiment.

Becky Lewis: I remember my own child doing this as well. Well, Kerri Templeton, these examples you've given are all very doable and are very practical examples of ways you can develop an infant's thinking skills.

Kerri Templeton: Yes, I truly want to emphasize that you don't have to buy anything special to develop a baby's language and literacy skills. It's really their natural curiosity and excitement to discover the world around them with guidance from a trusted caregiver that makes all the difference.

Samantha Statler: Yes.... I have enjoyed our conversation so much today and I know our listeners will find a lot of helpful information that we shared and hopefully they can begin to implement some of the activities we shared. As we close today, Kerri Templeton, I would love for you to share one tip or piece of advice that you could provide our listeners with supporting infants with school readiness?

Kerri Templeton: Thanks for that question, Samantha Statler. Absolutely. If I were to share one piece of advice, it is do not stop engaging your infant in language, communication, and activities. It doesn't have to be anything fancy or formal at all. Infants are constantly learning through everyday experiences and our engagement with them.