

Listen. Create. Motivate.

Professionally curated podcasts on
School Readiness, Attendance, Extended Learning
and High-Quality Instruction



Episode 48: Interview with Paula Stewart

Samantha Statler: Hello listeners and welcome back Kerri. I am excited to be back with you today to wrap up our conversation around school readiness.

Kerri Templeton: Thanks Sam, I'm so excited to be here and to be continuing this important conversation with you and our special guest today.

Samantha Statler: And just a reminder for our listeners that our episode focuses on school readiness with a specific focus on how children develop early learning milestones from birth to 12 months and this topic is critical because it does directly connect to that third-grade achievement gap.

Today we will be talking with Paula Stewart. She is employed by Linked Childcare Resource and Referral Agency in Huntington. Paula is a certified program for infant toddler care trainer and is endorsed through the West Virginia Infant and Toddler Mental Health Association. She has many years of experience working with little ones as well as offering training and coaching to childcare providers here in our state.

Paula, thank you for being here with us today and I am excited to learn from you and hear from you and just to know more about your expertise. Can you tell us just a little bit about yourself and the work that you do?

Paula Stewart: All right, yes, I do technical assistance coaching, mentoring with people that work with infants and toddlers. West Virginia has a 12-module program that is based on the training that we got from the program from infant and toddler caregivers from West Ed.

So, these past couple of times we have done it virtually, but we usually do it in person and we, you know, just teach some basic child development as well as a lot about health and safety and things that they can do with children.

West Virginia requires people that are center based to have 40 hours of infant toddler training. They can do that with the West Virginia Infant Toddler program class, whose nickname is WVIFT or they can do it through the apprenticeship for child development specialists as well.

Uhm, when they take with it, they get 52 hours with the apprenticeship class they have to finish the first two semesters, you know, and I've been doing this since 2009.

Samantha Statler: OK.

Paula Stewart: And prior to that I was involved in. And the training resource library and information program. And that is a van that visits family, childcare, family, childcare facilities, centers, head start, and it is a lending library. But we land developmentally appropriate materials and books for the whole age group and then prior to that, I worked in an infant room in a childcare Center for three years and prior to that I did family childcare for 17.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, so you have a lot of experience when it comes to infants and our young kiddos, huh?

Paula Stewart: Yes, and the whole time I did family childcare and family childcare in West Virginia, we can have two children under two. I always had those slots filled.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, that's great. Uhm, so specifically talking about the assistance and the training that you offer currently. How does that work fit in with the K through 12 education that we have?

Paula Stewart: Well, it helps our caregivers to be able to create a strong social emotional basis. In the children in infants and toddlers, we really, really emphasize relationship-based care. Uhm, because children learn through relationships and so we really emphasize building those relationships to make that secure social emotional foundation. Uhm, all the other learning is really very dependent on that strong social emotional development.

So, when that's compromised it compromises all the other learning domains. So, what we really want to focus on 1st is creating that strong social-emotional development, so the rest of the domains, even though they all happen at the same time can be wired stronger then when they get into pre-K, they already know how to make friends and how to communicate and get along and are more wired with a sense of wonderment and just being ready to learn.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, absolutely. I love that you're just talking about how important our children's social and emotional well-being is, especially you know the last few years with the pandemic that's been hard for all of us. You know all of us adults, but I'm sure even for our infants that's been something. You know that's been really challenging for them because you know they've been home most of or all of their lives they've just been home, so I'm glad that you brought attention to that, and you brought up that once a child has that secure social and emotional and they're able to form connections and relationships when they do.

But as far as like you know, a daily routine that some parents or caregivers might have. Can you think of some things that they could incorporate into just their daily routine to promote that literacy and language development?

Paula Stewart: Oh yes, absolutely, you know, and of course you know there is that relationship, but also using a lot of self- and parallel talk. So self-talk is when the caregiver is describing what they are doing. So, for instance during a diaper changing routine. "I am coming to pick you up now. It's time to change your diaper. I am lifting you up. I'm going to carry you to the changing table." Describe that step by step. Play some kind of a little finger game with them or do a little bit of an "I love you" ritual, meaning that you just have a special song or fingerplay routine that you would go through with that child every day. I am an amateur musician on the side, so I always like making up songs to tunes of other familiar things, you know. You know, so one of my favorite things was to play with her toes a little bit and to the tune golden slippers saying, "oh, there's baby toes. Oh, there's baby just gotta love, love, love, love, love, love this baby talk to toes."

That's an "I love you" ritual. Doing something like that?

Samantha Statler: I love that.

Paula Stewart: Yeah, well thank you. Uhm so and then the other part of that is to do parallel talk. When you're describing what they are doing. "Oh, you're giving me a Raspberry." And you do that back and forth, or "you're pushing the orange car across the floor." And so in in those situations. And because you're doing this parallel and this self-talk you are engaging with a child, you're doing social-emotional support.

You are giving them the words for what is going on, so that is supporting language, but it is also supporting cognitive because they're learning things like what up and down is, you know, in a diaper change they're, you know, learning what wet and dry is. So that's what I really find exciting about. Uhm, supporting this in infants and toddlers just because for our sakes. We separate out, you know, into different developmental domains, but they really all happen pretty much at the same time.

Kerri Templeton: Right, well thank you Paula for talking about the self and parallel talk and I love the idea of the “I love you” ritual. I think back to my own kids and how we used to have those little rituals and I could still sing some songs that I had with my daughter. So, thank you for that.

So, what are some strategies, you see, are beneficial to build thinking skills with infants?

Paula Stewart: Well, giving them opportunities to think. And not make decisions for them all the time. Uhm, you could do things like offer them two balls, a red one and a green one. And say you know, do you want the red ball or do? You want the green ball. And whichever one they look at the most intently or reach full, oh, you chose the green ball. We'll play with the green ball together. Uhm, but another important thing is to not interrupt their learning in order to try to teach them something.

So my favorite example of that is if you have a child that is playing with a shape sorter and they're trying to put a square peg in a round hole. And then they might try to put it in the triangle, and then they might go. Back to the circle. Our temptation sometimes is to walk up to that child and teach them how to do it right by putting either hand over hand or taking the square away from him and showing them how to put it in the square hole.

What actually happens is that we interrupt those little neurons connecting. They are thinking at that point because they have that opportunity to think, and unless they look at you and indicate they want help. Stand back, observe what they're doing. It would be a good time, you know, to take a few, you know, anecdotal notes about what the child is doing. You can be, you can say oh you are trying to put the square in the triangle hold. I wonder what would happen if you've tried a different shape. Because when you interrupt them, it cuts off that process that

learning process. And will also send a subliminal message to the child that I don't think you're quite smart enough to figure this out on your own. And so yeah, so we take a lot away from a child when we do that in our well-intentioned eagerness to help them out and to teach them to do it right, you know. But then again, like I said, if they turn around and hand that square to you like with the look on their face like. What I can't figure this out. Oh well, let's you know then if they ask for help give it to them.

Kerri Templeton: Yeah, absolutely. I think that that is so critical to make sure that we avoid that temptation to just jump in and solve those problems for our kiddos.

Samantha Statler: And that's so hard. That's so hard not to do.

Paula Stewart: It oh it is. It is a challenge, but it is also a delight to do that observation and have that look on their face when they figure it out on their own. You know that just big smile of triumph, “hey look what I did, I did this all by myself.” Uhm, and that is always just such a joy to see.

Kerri Templeton: So, you kind of touched on this already Paula, but why is it so important to build those thinking skills?

Paula Stewart: Thinking skills will also lead to decision skills and allow children to think about what they are doing. I think one thing that we lack in our society today is allowing children to take risks. Because when we allow them to take risks, we allow them to make a decision about whether something is safe or not. And when we don't give them those opportunities when they get older, they have no clue on what risky behavior may or may not be, and they make some poor decisions and make some decisions to have risky behavior because they've not been given that opportunity to go through that thought process of “oh, what might make this situation unsafe for me” and the other thing about building thinking skills is it gives us an opportunity to instill a sense of wonderment in children. And to let them be curious about the world around them, how much more is a child going to learn if they have that intrinsic sense of wonder and have that curiosity because then they really want to learn. About things and then then that gives them the opportunity to think about what they're learning.

So when we give them the opportunity to build those thinking skills and instill that sense of wonder. We're getting them ready to learn well, they're always learning, but just ready to learn in a different kind of environment.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, and I love how you know you said that as a society that you know we keep ourselves sometimes from letting our children make those decisions and take risks like you said. I have a three year so I'm just taking in everything you're saying, but I have been very cognizant of you know doing that to her and just like a quick example, you know whenever if she's like climbing up the slide at the playground instead of like telling her you know, "be careful, you know, watch out". I'm always like you know, "watch where your hands are, look how much space you have". So, I'm glad to hear that. Uhm, you know that's I'm doing something right when it comes to allowing her, you know to take those risks. Uhm, because you know how else is she going to have that you know, confidence in herself? Uh, you know and when we're talking about self-confidence Paula, how can we help develop those skills? How can we help our infants learn those self-confidence skills?

Paula Stewart: Well, again, you know I'm going to keep going back to the relationship because that is so important and why it's important in this situation, and even with very young infants when we meet their needs.

When they are crying, and we know why they're crying, and we take care of that need that starts building that self-confidence because they're getting the message, "Hey I have an effect on this world so when I cry my need is met and I begin I'm beginning to feel like I am in a safe place and I'm going to thrive."

Yeah, and sadly, when that doesn't happen there are times that that child will, you know, have failure to thrive because they don't feel like they can make it. They don't have an effect. Uhm, so I always advocate that you know you cannot spoil a baby, you don't need them to let it cry out to develop their lungs. Their lungs are fully developed if they're not a preemie. When they are born, they'll get bigger, but letting them cry isn't going to help their lung development at all.

But it is going to injure their self-esteem. And their social emotional well-being. So, you know, early on in time we want to we want to meet their needs. We want to help them feel safe, but as they start getting up and moving around, or even when they're just, you know, starting to track make positive comments about

that, like a child is on the verge of crawling. And so, you want to give them positive feedback. About what they're doing, instead of just saying "good job". "You're up on your hands and knees and you are rocking." "I like the way you are trying so hard to crawl." "Back up a little bit, see if you can come crawl to me" or you know, or when they start coloring or anything like that, describe what they're doing and say things like "I really like the fact that you wanted to have a blue and a red crayon." "You are making great big Marks and some little, tiny marks." "I really like how hard you're trying." "I can tell you are really thinking about."

If you want to say that they're doing a good job, you just did a really good job at helping pour your own milk. So be specific. Uhm, genuine. I think sometimes we get kind of get caught up into thinking we have to say good job all the time, you know and I've been doing technical assistance, and I see these little ones look like a good job at once. You know what all this stuff that I feel like I'm doing now was a good job and might even wonder what's a job, you know, yeah? So, when we can be very specific like that, it goes a long way and then again we're still supporting that language and cognitive development as well.

Kerri Templeton: I really appreciate how you keep going back to the relationship piece and how important and vital that truly is, and you talked a little bit about some problem-solving skills with infants and I'm just wondering how? What are some ways that we can promote those problem-solving skills?

Paula Stewart: Giving them opportunities that solve problems. Uhm, like I said, you know, even when they are trying to figure out a shape sorter be close by. And ready to give them support. Give them opportunities to choose. So, you know you can give them simple choices, you know. "Do you want to play with a doll, or do you want to play with the truck?" And then as they get older, you could also ask questions, wondering questions like, well, "I wonder what would happen if you went outside without your coat?" "It's really cold out today so you know what would happen if you don't wear your coat, how will you stay warm?" And give them opportunities for that, you know, and even with really young infants, you can ask them what they think. So even if they're you know they don't have words yet, but you're sitting there and you're reading the book to them. And you can ask them, well, what do you think is going to happen next, and when they Babble back at you, you respond to them like, "oh, really?" "Well, let's turn the page and

see.” You know that kind of thing and that then that helps them get that back and forth um, you know conversation skill going.

One of my favorite things that was like viral on Facebook for a while and we actually have inserted this video in our Revit training is the dad that is sitting on the couch watching TV with an infant. It was probably around 10 months old. And the little guys like “blah blah blah blah blah blah blah blah” and his dad's like. “Yeah, I think that too”. And they had this whole big conversation, this child never uses actual words, but it's so delightful to see them make that exchange, and so you know they're just trying to figure out what's going to happen next in this show so. Yeah, even ask you know, even as permission for a child, may I pick you up? And it's fascinating how I had learned about that at one of the training sessions I went to, and I was like. And I was doing a visit in the center and there was a little baby lying on the floor next to me. I yeah, I had been talking to him and you know. So, we kind of have a little bit of thing going on. We played peekaboo and all this kind of stuff. And he was starting to fuss a little bit, and I looked at him. And I said, “would you like for me to pick you up, may I pick you up, you know” and he may have known me for 1/2 hour. Even even little infants newborns you can still ask some questions.

Samantha Statler: Right, yeah? Uhm, so for any childcare providers or any K12 educators that might be tuning in today, can you think of just like 1 tip or one piece of advice that's centered around the work that you do that you would give them?

Paula Stewart: Build that stable relationship. Make that child think the sun rises and sets with them. One thing that I truly believe and that as caregivers we sometimes have this responsibility. But every child deserves to have someone in their life. That is absolutely crazy about them.

And when we are working with young children, we have the opportunity to be that person and that can make a huge difference to a child. Because sometimes they may not have that at home, but if they can get that when they're in childcare or even in pre-K if they have that one adult in their life that just. It's crazy about him. It would go a long way to securing that child's future.