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EHDI - PARIS

THE FOUNDATIONS OF SELF-REGULATION

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>> MARI HUBIG: I think we're going to go ahead and get rolling. My name is Mari Hubig, I'm the birth to three outreach specialist at the Texas School for the Deaf, I work in the educational resource center on deafness. I'm also a 27‑year deaf ed teacher, most spent working in homes with infants and toddlers and families.

And thank you all for being here. I know the last session of the last day is hard one for all of us to get to. So I appreciate you guys sticking with us through this final session.

Today we're going to talk about the foundations of self‑regulation.

So the first thing I wanted to look at, I just always want us to be a little bit focused on what we're really talking about. Everything that has been talked about at this whole conference comes down to the brain. The brain has multiple areas, it's not one area, focuses on one skill development. They are interspersed throughout the brain, and it is crucial that we remember with everything we do that we are engaging the brain and we need to engage the whole brain in order to have healthy brain growth and development.

When we're looking at brain growth in little children, we're looking at the kids starting with knowledge. They see it, they hear it, they touch it, they taste it. When they're born, everything is immediately creating these little pockets of knowledge. As they have experiences and most of the time they're happening simultaneously and we begin to have connections among the pieces of knowledge.

Again, this is to illustrate how crucial... sorry, end of the day... crucial it is for us to stimulate the whole brain. More experience, stimulation, the more connections, the more complexity, the better the child's foundation is for life in general.

Along with this we're looking at activity. For many of us who have worked in homes, when I was starting out as a new teacher, sitting on floors with toys and playing with the child, that was our activity. That's not really a natural activity for most little people to spend 35 or 40 or 60 minutes on the floor with an adult playing with a toy and trying to develop a little bit of language around that toy. That's not to say that's not ‑‑ that's not to say that's a bad thing in moderation. But sitting quietly only stimulates part of the brain.

Physical activity stimulates a lot more of the brain. The more we're doing, the more active we are, the more we're engaging the whole brain, the more learning we have.

All right.

So that was sort of the foundation, because the rest of this topic has to do with brain development and self‑regulation. We're going to look at executive function. We're also going to look at serve and return.

So when looking at executive function, we're looking at really three primary processes. We're looking at working memory, which is the ability to obtain and manipulate distinct pieces of information over short periods of time. We're looking at mental flexibility, which is the ability to sustain or shift attention in response to different demands or apply different rules in different settings. And we're looking at self‑control, which your ability to set priorities and resist impulsive actions or responses.

Now, granted young children have ‑‑ even young children with really good early development in this, we still have meltdowns and still have periods of not having great self‑regulation, but the foundation to develop this is in every child. They're not born with it. They don't come out with self‑regulation, but the ability to develop it is there in every single child.

Executive function, skills are learned. So they have to be modeled. They have to be taught. The children have to see it on an ongoing basis.

Obviously things such as stress, toxic stress, poverty, neglect, some of the trauma areas have a very negative impact on a child's ability to self‑regulate.

In early childhood, children who use the same cognitive processes in situations that are requiring control, but once they get older, these processes are more specialized. So in little kids, we're looking at kind of a general learning of this task. When we're looking at middle school, high school, older, those kids are able to maybe suppress a typical action in a specific environment or they are able to multitask.

Little children do not multitask. You've got to be skilled at both of those things that you're trying to do simultaneously.

And so this development continues through time. It continues as the children get older, but it changes, obviously, as they grow and as their brains grow.

We're looking at a scaffolded instruction when we're talking about self‑regulation.

So when we're looking at a little kid, there's a lot more modeling instruction ‑‑ modeling instruction, helping the child, giving them that feedback and as the child gets older, ostensibly in an environment where that child is developing these skills, we are able to back off, and they are slowly able to regulate themselves.

This slide is just taking another look at that brain concept. These are the specific areas of executive function. And as you can see, along with looking at that brain at the beginning that showed all the different pieces that the brain regulates, the areas of executive function are all over the brain. They're not processed out of one area. And so, again, we really want to make sure that we're stimulating that because we're drawing on what the child knows and understands in certain areas in order to increase their knowledge and understanding in these newer areas.

It's also really important to know that executive function skill at the beginning of preschool directly correlates to receptive language skills at the end of preschool.

The better kids self‑regulating, the better they are at focusing, the better they are at tuning out distractions in their environment, the better they are at learning.

So there's a lot of correlation to executive function that ties back to school readiness, that ties back to academic achievement and ties to language development.

So how do parents and caregivers help children develop these skills?

Some of these we know. Those in early intervention know. We teach this. Establish dependable routines. It establishes a sense of trust and safety. It gives children the sense of what is coming next and predictability. Modeling good social behavior. How are they going to learn it if they don't ever see it?

Activities that help them develop creative play and social connection. Our kids have got to have those opportunities to develop socially and to be creative in their environments. I just recently was ‑‑ there was an interesting article in The New York Times recently about the fact that we don't allow children to be bored anymore. That our whole environment is "hand them a device, give them something to do, keep them busy, don't let them be bored."

Well, boredom fosters creativity. If I'm bored, I'm going to figure out what to do to be not bored anymore. But if somebody just hands me stuff constantly, I never learn to do that for myself. Creating and maintaining supportive relationships.

We've got to have dependable supportive relationships. And that looks different in different families. There's not a one‑size‑fits‑all, but within the family unit, figuring out what that supportive, dependable relationship is and help encourage parents to foster that.

Teaching ways to cope with stress. You know, every toddler is going to have a meltdown. They're all going to get mad. I didn't get the colored cup I wanted, I didn't get the candy in the grocery store, but helping them understand how to deal with their own stress, encouraging vigorous exercise. Some of us are working with kids who have additional disabilities.

So you know, I've had people say, if you have to engage the whole brain, what about kids who can't walk?

We do the best we can. We get them up as much as we can. We move their bodies. We get them in a wheelchair, we get them in a stroller. We pick them up and put them on the ground and let them explore their environment. We help them through that as much as we can, again, because of the need for that stimulation.

And providing opportunities for kids to make independent decisions. Do you want the red one or the green one? It's not always, do you want to go to bed or not? Don't give them that choice. They will always make the opposite choice you would like them to, but giving them choice to make autonomous decisions so they start to feel the sense of independence and "I can."

This is a very brief video, but it's a totally visual example of a child using executive function.

He is building for anybody ‑‑ anybody who knows Montessori, this is a Montessori pink tower, so the blocks are graded in different sizes. And the whole point is you have to visually figure out how to stack it from the biggest to the smallest. And this little guy has been taught how to do it, because he gets to a point and realizes that he made a mistake and takes it down and starts again.

But just watch. Watch the environment around him. Watch everything that is going on. And watch his focus on this particular task.

>> MARI HUBIG: This is a section out of a longer video. He does successfully complete the tower. He was about three. Three, three and a half. But if you notice, did you see everything going on around him? There are kids walking in front of him, kids passing really close by, somebody bumps him, he drops a block and picks it up. Every single time, he went right back to the task. He didn't get distracted, he didn't meltdown when somebody touched him. He didn't have any sort of issue staying focused on what he was doing. He was interested in it, and that's crucial. But he knew how to self‑regulate. He knew how to tune that out and do what it is he was interested in and what he needed to do.

That skill is in every child that is born. It's in there. We have to teach it to them. That innate ability to do it, we all have it. Children who don't learn how to do that struggle. Imagine now that child at six in a first‑grade classroom, and they're at separate tables and there's movement and a lot going on and the teacher is talking and then there's seat work with your classmates. There is so much happening, and these kids that can't stop and focus and not get distracted by every little thing or not have a large emotional response to every little thing, they really struggle to bring that information in and make sense of it and learn and grow.

It doesn't mean they don't learn and grow. But they don't do it as quickly as they could with this foundation.

So along with that goes responsive parenting. In order to have executive function, in order to learn, in order to self‑regulate, we've got to have responsive parenting. Serve and return is a great example of responsive parenting.

Basically, the child serves. The child does something to get your attention. They make a sound. They make a motion. They smile. They wiggle their eyebrows. Something. This little guy is holding out food.

The parent returns the serve. And that return can be in any form. It can be language. You can sign ‑‑ like this dad is signing "eat." He could sign "banana." He could say "banana." He could say "thank you" or "mmm... yummy! "

He could look pleased and just take a bite of it. The point is he acknowledged the child and what the child was interested in and gave a response.

This leads to turn taking. Serve and return, like anything with little kids, can be a single turn. It can be multiple turns. But every time the child serves, we want to return that serve in a positive and supportive manner. We want them to keep doing it.

If the adult response to a child's serving are unreliable or are absent, we see a very different response out of these children. They try and they try, and at some point they get frustrated, they get angry, they start to show very negative emotions. And at some point they do stop trying.

So, it's crucial ‑‑ and obviously parents can't return every serve all day long multiple times. We can't drop everything we do every time your child serves.

You respond to that in the moment, you know, oh, I see that! Hold on. Finish what we're doing.

But you find time. You help parents find time in their day when they can focus on that. When they can focus on what it is that their child is interested in and they can continue that turn taking and continue to return those serves in order to help develop that sense in the child of "I'm important." What I'm interested this is important. My caregiver, my parent, this other person is also taking an interest in it and in me. Which keeps that movement happening. And I keeps that brain growing. And it helps also develop language.

So, there are some specific areas in serve and return we're going to take a quick look at.

Pay attention. Notice what interests them. What are they looking at? What are they pointing at? What are they grasping for?

It's like everything in birth to three, it's follow the child's lead. If they're interested in it, they're going to want to talk about it, they're going to want to communicate, they're going to want to interact about it.

Obviously we want to return that serve and we want to give it back.

You can do it in a positive and supportive way. Again, it can have language. It can be a gesture. It can be a facial expression, but the child needs to know that we have responded to what it is they put out there.

Making language connections is also a really important piece of this. Again, it doesn't always have to be language. But for our kids, for kids who are deaf and hard of hearing, that is a very big piece. We want to give them that language too.

So they indicate something they're interested in. We respond to that serve, but we include a label, a name, an action, an emotion. Again, that attention to what they are interested in and then giving them these extra pieces helps keep them moving forward.

Back and forth. The turn taking piece of this. We know how to take turns. But a really crucial part of this is waiting. It's so easy to get excited.

The child serves. They're interested in something. Maybe they sign "more." And mama signs "more cracker" and gives them a cracker. They take a bite and put the cracker down. We're waiting. More cracker, we sign to the child again. And we sign it again and again. Five or six seconds in between. We have to step back.

Serve and return is dependent on the child. They serve, we return, and then we wait. Wait time is hard. As a deaf ed teacher what we learned is 10‑15 seconds is standard wait time. The child needs time to process it. They need to process what you did back and they need to decide where they're going to go next with it.

If we jump in too fast, we stop that process. We stop that sense for them of independence, of having some control over what we're doing and we slow down their ability to think it through and come up with their next serve.

If you are interacting with a child and you stop and count to 15 in your head, it's way longer than you think it is. It feels like an eternity. But it can take kids, especially kids who are deaf and hard of hearing, that long to process it and come up with the next thing they want to give you. Wait time is so important.

Endings and beginnings. The beginning is the serve. That's the child indicating, we're starting this game, we're starting this interaction. But it's really important that we notice when they're done.

And if you're paying attention, if you're following their lead you know when they're done. They're not going to pick up the toy. They're not going to make eye contact with you, we're done talking, done imitating, I'm going to put my head on the floor, I'm going to scooch away from you, I'm going to leave the room if I have the ability.

Don't try to draw them back in if they have signaled that they are done. Move on to the next thing that they're interested in. It doesn't have ‑‑ we don't have to stay in this one little corner that they showed initial interest in. We want to follow them throughout their interests when we're interacting with them. So notice when they're ready to be done and be ready to move on with them. It's okay.

I suspect some of you guys have seen this before. If you have not, I'm going to give you a heads‑up. This is a little hard.

This was done ‑‑ this is an experiment called the still face experiment. It was done related to attachment, but it's also an example of a child serve not being returned and how they respond. Now, this is a child who typically does get their serves returned. And a researcher has asked the mother to still her face for two minutes and not respond to her child.

I'm going to let it speak for itself.

>> ... coordinate their emotions and their intentions, what they want to do in the world. And that's really what the baby is used to. And then we asked mother to not respond to the baby.

The baby very quickly picks up on this. And then she uses all of her abilities to try and get the mother back.

She smiles at the mother.

She points. Because she's used to the mother looking where she points.

The baby puts both hands up in front of her and says, what's happening here?

She makes that screechy sound at the mother.

[ screeching ]

... like come on, why aren't we doing this?

Even in the two minutes where they don't get the normal reaction. They react with negative emotions. They turn away.

They feel the stress of it. They actually may lose control of their posture because of the stress that they're experiencing.

[ crying ]

>> Okay... okay...

[ crying ]

>> And what are you doing?

Oh, yes! Oh, what a...

>> MARI HUBIG: That video is longer than that. You know, there's a bigger introduction and they show different pieces. But the first time I saw that, that was heart wrenching, and I cannot imagine being that mother, having to sit there and hold your face still while your child is desperately trying to get your attention.

I use that, though, because it's a beautiful example, unfortunately, of how the children respond when they're not getting their serves returned.

And when we've got kiddos who are experiencing that lacking response, a limited response, or ongoing negative response, that is what we start to see, that stress, that turning away, those stress hormones are flooding the child's brain. Why aren't you responding to me? What's going on? And at some point they do stop. At some point those serves diminish and then will stop if they're not given the opportunity to have those returned and to continue to foster that turn taking.

All right. I will now take questions if there are questions. I saw a hand go up in the back of the room.

Hang on, let me ‑‑ for the captionist, let me give you this.

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: I was just curious, and maybe it's just too short of time to know, but just the cell phone, how often parents are just ignoring these? Because I have kids that are older, so cell phones weren't around when they were little, but how much we're trying to do this and people are absorbed in their phone.

>> MARI HUBIG: That's a very current example of kids who don't necessarily get their serves returned because they're trying. They're trying to get mom and dad's attention and mom and dad are right here in this phone. It's up in their nose. I've seen parents issue their child as the child is trying to tell them something important, sure them. Mama is busy, mama is busy.

Mama, be busy over here. Put the phone down!

And that is... that is a really challenging thing in our society right now, because people are married to their devices. They're married to their...

I almost ran over somebody in the grocery store parking lot the other day because she literally had her nose in her phone and stepped in front of my moving car. She wasn't looking. She was so busy with what was on that screen. When that is happening with a small child, we do end up with this deprivation of interaction. Encouraging parents to find that time to put that phone down. It's so critical. We've got to have human interaction. Handing a baby the phone with a video of a person on it is not human interaction. It is not the same. It will never develop that child's brain the same way that a human being interacting with another human being will.

Other questions?

Comments?

We have a very cute little busy person in the back of the room that I've been totally entertained by during this presentation.

Just adorable.

Having a party back there.

[chuckles]

All right. If anybody thinks of anything, my information... this presentation is uploaded on to the website along with the handout that goes with the information. My contact information is on it. Please feel free... yes, ma'am?

>> AUDIENCE MEMBER: Do you find a difference in response with different cultures, where some cultures looking directly at someone is not acceptable?

>> MARI HUBIG: Absolutely. And within those contexts we want to respect and follow that cultural norm, because that is the environment that child is growing up in. That's their culture.

We want to get with that parent and find out about those pieces, how do people interact in your culture?

What is acceptable? What is not?

Because granted, these are very American examples. That is the culture that I typically live in, but when we're talking about families with a different cultural background, absolutely, we have to respect and go with what they do.

They will still grow good healthy brains in children. It will just look different than the way I grew up.

All right. Thank you so much, everybody.

Safe travels back if you don't live here.

Thank you!