TTAC Webinar: The Unique Toddler World: Key Foundational Elements for a Lifetime of Thriving

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TTACNY Info: Good afternoon, and welcome to today's TTAC webinar, The Unique Toddler World, Key Foundational Elements for a Lifetime of Thriving, with Dr. Tovah Klein. My name is Marcela Gomez, I'm a Senior Program Coordinator for TTAC, and I'm so happy to be joined by our presenter and by you all today.

A few logistics about the session before a presenter begins.

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We'll be taking questions throughout the webinar via the chat, and we've reserved time at the end to address them. Toward the end of the session, we'll also be sending out a feedback survey in the chat box for you to complete. We really appreciate you filling this out, as it allows us to understand your experience and enhance our future TTAC offerings. With that, I want to thank you again for joining us, and I'll hand it over to Evelyn Blanck, Executive Director at the New York Center for Child Development and Director of TTAC. She'll walk us through a brief introduction before our presenter begins.

Evelyn Blanck: Thank you so much, Marcela, and if we go to the next slide, I just wanted to briefly state who we are.

The New York City Perinatal and Early Childhood Mental Health Training and Technical Assistance Center, otherwise known as TTAC, is funded by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. TTAC is a partnership between the New York Center for Child Development and the McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research.

New York Center for Child Development has been a major provider of early childhood mental health services in New York, and we have expertise in informing policy and supporting the field of early childhood mental health through training and direct practice.

NYU McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research houses the Community and Managed Care Technical Assistance Centers and the Center for Workforce Excellence.

These TA centers offer clinic, business, and system transformation support statewide to all behavioral health care providers across New York State.

TTAC is tasked with building the capacity and the competencies of mental health professionals and early childhood professionals in family-serving systems, with the aim to identify and address the social-emotional needs of young children and their families. If we go to the next slide, it's just a screenshot of our website, which we encourage everybody to use. You'll see the link there to the website. You can view all of our archived webinars, both the PowerPoints as well as the recordings, as well as other resources as well. So it's now my pleasure to introduce our speaker today, Dr. Tovah Klein, who was the director of the Barnard Center for Toddler Development and Psychology, as well as a professor at Barnard College, Colombo University, for three decades.

She is the author of national bestsellers, How Toddlers Thrive, What Parents Can Do Today for Children Ages 2 to 5 to Plant the Seeds of Lifelong Success, and Raising Resilience, How to Help Our Children Thrive in Times of Uncertainty.

Note that her books are translated into 11 different languages.

Dr. Klein is a graduate of the University of Michigan and holds a doctorate in clinical and developmental psychology from Duke University. In her roles as a researcher, professor, and in direct care with parents and children for over 30 years, Dr. Klein has helped define what every child needs to thrive, regardless of their life situations.

Working worldwide with programs addressing the needs of families, she is sought after as a developmental expert on a range of timely topics and advisor to a wide range of children's media and organizations. So, it's now my pleasure to welcome Dr. Klein.

Tovah P. Klein: Thank you. I hope you can all hear me. I'm excited to be here. I appreciate the introduction and the invitation and everybody coming, on this snowy day.

So I have the pleasure of talking about toddlers today, and what I'm going to hope to do in this presentation is with all of you out there, dive into this toddler world, what it is, and why they do it. And I want to remind people that, , we often think of toddlers, we think of those early walkers who are toddling around, , a little unstable, gleeful at their new, view of the world.

But really, when I define toddlers, I think about those children, , one and a half to five, because it's in that period that you get this incredibly rapid development, and that's what I'm going to be focusing on today.

So let me start with this. Everybody on here probably already knows this, the toddler world is unique, and I say that in a very kind way that it's completely unlike ours. And when we move to see it from where they stand, we start to gain a better understanding, and it doesn't seem as odd as it does from an adult point of view. So whether that's emotionally, socially, with cognitive and the sort of learning domains, and that includes language and language acquisition, but they're also going through rapid physical growth and changes, and I always think about when I look at toddlers, when I'm with them.

What must it be to, every single day of your life, wake up and be a little bit taller, bigger, , a slightly new skill that's going to become a big new skill, and that every single day is different? It's gotta be hard, and that's why life can be hard for them at times.

Okay, so let me start with this. If I was in a room with you, I would say think for a moment and raise your hand, but I'm gonna say think for a moment about what that toddler world is.

It is filled with wonder and curiosity, partly because everything is new to them. Every day is a discovery, and you see that in their exuberance and passion, but I also say in their withdrawal or pulling back, it's a lot to take in new every single day.

It's filled with discovery and what I call unconventionality, right? They don't know the rules of the land. They don't know…how adults move through the world, or even older children. So they're on their own path of exploration, which can be frustrating to adults, to people working with them, to parents.

But it's also because they don't see the limits of this is how it's done. They can come up with their own ways.

Repetition, I could give a whole talk on this. There's a lot of repetition. That's the key to mastery. When they have something new, they may even get fixated on it, and they do it over and over and over until it's mastery, and then they change it up, or they move on, everything is now, I'm going to talk about that, throughout the talk, because they have a very limited sense of time, or no sense of time, depending on their age within that toddlerhood. And this is a, a brain limitation, or not a limitation, but their brain doesn't have that ability yet to wait, or to know that something's coming next. The idea comes, and they want to act right now. And then there's what I call the me, me, me, me, me, which we all know, which is that discovery of self that can look selfish, but developmentally, there's a reason for it. And I just want to point out this, picture at the top of these three children. That's our, toddler center classroom, although we have a beautiful new facility now.

And you can imagine for yourself what they're looking at, what they're doing. So these are steering wheels that they can drive and move. The little guy in the middle has a shopping basket, which they love to just fill with things. And, you can think to yourself, oh, what are they looking at? What are they so excited about? Come up with whatever you think it is. But what they're looking at from an adult point of view, is nothing.

But when I greeted them in the hall that day, they started screaming and yelling about a bug, a bug, a bug, but the bug was something that one of those children made up, that was on the floor, that they all then played along with, came into the room, and this is, , 20 minutes later, and they're still telling a story about a bug. That's the beauty of two-year-olds.

So, what are the primary developmental tasks that are both the beauty of toddlers and also what makes it sometimes a challenge? They really do give us clues as to, sort of, what their world is. So the developmental tasks of this age, separation and building trust is paramount. Separation is this age.

We think about it as being so central to that very young child, the child who gets up on their feet, that, , 18 months to two and a half, but separation is lifelong, and I want to be sure to emphasize that. It's starting now. It is core that they have the ability to separate and build trust. But this is part of becoming their own person. So they're moving out in the world a little further from their trusted adults, hopefully they have trusted adults, and that's the beginning of developing self, or the me, because of that, they're also experiencing new emotions. This is partly brain development, so there are a lot of new emotions their brain is also giving them language, sometimes in multiple languages, sometimes one, sometimes two, sometimes three, and this allows them to really try to figure out the world. But I will say, as toddlers separate from that primary caregiver, or caregivers, or extended family, and they develop that sense of me, they… that's when they become active agents in the world. It's not that infants don't have some active agency beginning, they're crawling, they're moving, but that toddler really is in the world making, choices for themselves, and that's where you get that insatiable curiosity and wanting to know.

But as I'm gonna talk about, as they move out in the world, and there's so much there.

They also realize the world's a big place, and they need a really safe place to return to, which is usually a mommy, a daddy, both, two mommies, two daddies, it could be a grandparent, it can be other caregivers, but they need that safe place to return to, because it's a lot to be out in that world.

And then I'm gonna talk a lot about play today, because play is world. I know people talk about play as the childhood, and say, bristle a bit, because I think it's work for them, I think it's their world.

Okay, so what comes first? Given that, I don't know if all of you are mental health people, but you're in that field, most of you, many of you are probably parents as well.

Relationships come first. This is literally the bedrock upon which all of their development occurs. We know this from decades and decades of developmental research.

I had the pleasure of being in college in the 1980s when attachment research was big, and I filmed over and over strange situations, which is what gives us this science of attachment.

But we've learned plenty since then. So we know this is the bedrock, and that there's new, newer, developmental neuroscience, which shows where this resides in the brain, literally. But it begins in infancy.

And this is going to provide the foundation of security, of trust, and of care. And if you're working with children who don't have this or didn't get this, the good news is you're in there to correct that for them, and to provide or help bring that

caregiver and child into this connection. So you can see here, there's a teacher, there's a mother, there's a grandparent. These are all loving relationships, and that's, what children need. And if…

For the professionals out there, if you're listening, you're a teacher, all of you matter, and the more hurt a child has had, the more other adults in their life can play this very corrective role.

And I think we underestimate that sometimes. Okay.

So, think of separation as this very core developmental task. In that first year of life, the infant becomes attached. We hope that it's a secure attachment. The good news is, out in the world, across cross-cultural studies, anywhere in the world, a vast majority of children have secure attachments, because you don't need a perfect relationship, you need a good enough loving relationship.

So first there's attachment, and I always think about this as…there's an irony here, because you have to attach in order to be able to separate in a healthy way. So first, the attachment, then the separation. If you don't have that healthy attachment, it's too scary to separate.

It's very powerful. So there's the attachment, there's the separation.

This is very powerful because it's from this separation that emerges that toddler's sense of, who am I in this world? If I get loving care, I must be worthy of it, and I can move out into that world. And that's what spurs their incredible desire to be out in the world.

But it also sets up this incredible push-pull. I think Alicia Lieberman, it was the first time I saw this term, push-pull, and I said, that's what it is. They want to be in their safe place, and they equally, desperately want to be out there, exploring, and so what's their lifelong exploration? It's really how do you balance the two? Have that connection, and have that exploration.

From this will emerge incredible emotions. It's an ongoing process, right? So again, I've worked with 2- and 3-year-olds for much of my life. I taught Barnard and Columbia students.

And often, I find that parents, certainly students, but often even professionals, we think, oh, they're separated. And I want to say there's no such thing as, I was attached, and now I'm separated. This is a process that goes on and on, really through life.

But this idea that I return to my safe base when I need that comfort, or just a little check-in, and then I go out again, it's very much, a push and pull.

And what the emotional development does is bring up a lot of new emotions, but they're also processing loss. Because every time we set up this paradigm of, I'm going to bring you to this beautiful daycare center, these are the caregivers who are going to take care of you.

The child may be happy to be there, they may be happy to be a preschooler at their speech therapist.

But they have to say goodbye, and so in that is a loss and a gain, and that's what they're processing over and over again. Because if they learn that they can say goodbye, it's because they know they're going to see that person again. Whether it's at the end of the day, whether it's a grandparent that they might see weeks later, it's that idea that they're building the trust that they're not being left forever.

And I think, again, that can be hard as an adult to imagine. What's it that every time I say goodbye, I think, is this goodbye? But when the parent says, I'll see you at dinner, or daddy's picking you up today.

The child is building this internal, very strong sense of, I'm gonna be okay, and we're gonna reunite again.

And this is where the beautiful pathway of independence begins.

And again, it's based in this interdependence with adults. It's not a dichotomy of either I'm independent or I'm dependent, it's both. I've got this context of being bathed in security.

And then, the toddler moves out in the world, and they start to do this beautiful thing, which is they practice the adult world. I mean, yes, they play and they do all kinds of things.

Of exploring and discovery, but so much of their play, particularly at that 2 and young 3 age, and even moving into the 4s is around practicing the adult world, from cooking to feeding, and they're also messaging us about the care that they get. And when you see that gentle caregiving of the babies.

Even if they get mad at the baby, certainly if there's a new baby at home for that toddler, they're gonna hopefully take it out of the baby dolls or the stuffed animals, rather than their own baby. But they're getting those emotions processed. But they're also showing us what they've experienced in the world, because that's what they can show us in their play. So I find it very beautiful, to watch.

And now I just want to show you a little video, sent to me by a dear friend. This is my godson, he calls me Tia, and this is him on a day that he demands, for the first time, no stroller. He's 19 months old.

And just watch both the uprightness of this very big little person, because he looks… physically looks older. In fact, the pediatrician at a year said he'll be a late walker, because he's so big. He walked at 13 months, and even she was , wow.

But now he's out exploring the world without that stroller, and so watch his affect, watch his body, watch what he does. It's just a very brief…

Okay, so you can see his pride in walking, and this… he's been outside a lot at this point, but this may be his first time walking this path, or this street, walking on the grates, which I think are really sweet, because it matches his hat, the lines of the grates.

And that joy that he shows, and then the checking in with his mom.

Right? She's there filming him, pushing the stroller, but he peeks back to her, right? So, it's that beginning of, I'm on my own, and I'm with you.

So what does this lead? Whoops.

I could show them to you over and over. So what does this lead to? It leads to this figuring it out in the world. So making sense of their world.

And this is, again, the beginning of what's going to go through life, but it's the early stages of it, which is what makes it both fragile and, I think, really vibrant.

So what is it that they're trying to figure out? Well, first of all, they're trying to make sense of a very big world, and for any of you who are working on the… I think we're all working on the sensory input of children, but if you're… if that's your specialty, if you're an OT, right, they're taking in what they're seeing, what they're hearing, what they're seeing, what they're feeling.

A lot of people, a lot of sounds, and so it's a lot. And again, I think when we step back, we can appreciate how much it is for them.

So they're figuring out the world with this sort of, hello world, here I am.

And one of the things that they do is they're really trying to bring some order, and reassuring themselves that they're okay in this world. They're also recognizing that they have impact. So there's themselves, what it means to be me, and soon there's going to be this sense of others beyond their primary attachments. And then they've got all these emotions that are so new. And again, I have to emphasize, I think as an adult, it's hard to imagine what it's to have never really felt this range of emotion, but also to then have to feel it, learn to understand it, and then handle it. It's a tall order.

And I always think about, I'm just gonna give you an example of a child in this discovery, watching, a child one day at our center pick up… give them water and, , a little cup to drink, and the teachers would give them very little, because a lot of them, the first exploration is dumping it on the table, and then a teacher would just hand them a sponge and say, oh, you forgot that's for drinking. Here, you can wipe that up. No harm, no shame. But this child is pouring it, so she… she takes… we give it to them in a little picture. She takes that picture, she pours it into her cup.

She watches the stream go from the pitcher to the cup, even though there's not a lot there. That little stream is fascinating to her. She then takes the cup, pours it back into the pitcher.

She then does this back and forth and back and forth, and I could watch her whole body sit up straighter, a smile come across her face, with that agency of, I can do this, before she puts it in the cup and drinks it. That's those moments every single day that the toddler has.

They're scientists.

Okay, so… , we often then say about toddlers, particularly those 2-year-olds and the young threes.

They're selfish, and nothing could be further from the truth. They are self-centered, meaning I'm figuring out my place in the world, and what I can do, and I'm exploring, and when I'm doing that, nothing matters but me.

What's so important about that is that when they start with that understanding of self, they then start to turn to others. They're attracted to their peers, they want to play with them, and in time, they begin to understand others.

That doesn't really happen if they don't have that window to focus on me.

The world is big. They're exploring it. They don't want to be alone in that world, and that's the challenge for them, is that when we stop children, often for safety reasons, , I always say to a parent, yes, grab their hand before they run into the street, don't just ask them to stop.

But sometimes we jump in and we say, oh, no, no, no, no, or that's not safe, or, , you can't have that, whatever it is. Children get ashamed very quickly.

Not because we mean to shame them, but because as they come out in the world, shame is a post-potent feeling, and shame is what will hold them back.

Because they then become that much more fearful, and some children, as , are already naturally fearful. But when we go back to them and say, I didn't mean to scare you, or I shouldn't have yelled that, they can come back to, I'm okay now. Shame is a natural feeling, I suppose it keeps us honest, but we don't want to shame them.

So what do children do out in the world to take some control of this big place? They play peek-a-boo or hide and seek, hide and return, is what I call it with toddlers, because they don't usually

wait to be sought out, or sometimes they do. Okay, and that's, again, that tension of, I want to be out in the world.

I need to know you're there for me.

So here is, the little guy who was walking before, now two and a half, hiding in plain sight, which they often do.

And if you've ever wondered, why do they do this over and over, especially when it's in plain sight, which I find adorable, right? They leave and disappear. He's disappeared from us.

Now he's peeking to let us know where he is.

And to make sure we're still there. And then there's the glee of I come back. And because they play this over and over, that they are repeatedly processing separation.

Okay.

So, why emotions? Why even, , go there at this age?

Well, partly because they're new for the toddler, and partly because we know they don't handle them on their own yet. So, at the bottom, you can see this sweet infant.

who we don't expect to handle their own emotions. We expect that we're going to calm them, comfort them, and all of those things. With toddlers, they're experiencing the emotions themselves, and often we forget they can't handle the intense emotions by themselves. They're still very dependent on us. So what are those emotions going to lead to?

They're gonna be part of their social relationships. You have to learn…to handle your emotions if you're gonna eventually get along with peers. Sometimes you get along, and sometimes you don't, but handling frustration, anger, disappointment with friends, is really important.

Cognitively, thinking and learning, it's gonna require a lot of handling frustration, coming up with alternatives when your way doesn't work.

So frustration tolerance is a big part of a learning cycle. And then that emerging sense of self, me, that's where you see all that glee and joy, that they show us, but also, how are they going to come to understand the negative emotions? What about when they feel anger? What about when they feel disappointment?

That's a big part of learning for toddlers, which we hope turns into self-confidence, which then becomes, understanding others. So every time you see that toddler repeating a task, doing that thing over and over, which, , can seem so repetitive that often parents get very worried, I would say if it's not interfering with the rest of their development, then yes, they're gonna put that puzzle piece in and out and in and out over and over and not come to dinner right now, right? Because that's how they gain that confidence of… of, I can do things in this world, and I can

figure it out. And they're gonna hide and peek. I'm realizing this top picture is a child popping out of a box, right? Opening the windows, and there I am again. So all of this is gonna lead to that core sense of self that we want them to have.

So, I'm going to take a moment, to have you digest all that, and recognize that toddlers are challenging. I always say I get incredible joy from them, but I've also raised 3, I've had 3 in my house.

Toddlers challenge us, and I say, let me count the ways. So I think as professionals, we also have to say there are a lot of challenges here when I'm working with a young child.

A 2-year-old, a 3-year-old, a 4-year-old. 4-year-olds are all about power. And I'm just gonna name some of the ways, and you can come up with your own. They can't sit still for long.

Except when they do, but it's not always when we want them to. They can be very impulsive, some children more than others, but even the children who we think, oh, she's got it all together, she's not that, suddenly tosses something across the room.

Right? They've got a lot of impulse. They can be aggressive. I think I've seen it all in 30 years of watching toddlers. They bite, they scratch, they kick, they hit, they pinch, they pull. They don't listen.

Except when they do, right? So they do follow routines sometimes, but they don't always listen, in the moment. Transitions tend to be hard. Harder for some than others, but going from this place to that place, putting something away to come to a table is very hard for many children.

And they're unpredictable, right? Their emotions shift, their behavior shifts, often with what feels without warning to us, but may have been warnings that we didn't see.

And then some children are this version, what we call shy, reticent, say, , they're slow to warm up, they observe for a long time. I don't think there is such a thing as a child who's this all the time, but can we give them enough time?

I hear this from people all the time, they won't join anything, they want to say they won't, or do we need to give them that warm-up?

And trust that they will. And they love to throw objects, materials, food. I put this all out there because we really need to be aware of ourselves, and I say that because different behaviors get under the skin of different people.

So…

This is for your own, sort of, homework on professional development. What is your challenge? And we say, don't be ashamed.

But know your own push points, and if you can shed the shame of it and say, , oh, I may have been in this field for 5 years, 10 years, 30 years, there's still that piece that can be hard.

So, is it aggression? Is it the child who denies everything? Oh, it wasn't me, when you've just seen what happened? Is it the biter, the thrower, the snatcher, the one who's constantly at another child?

This happens to be my 26-year-old son and his best friend. And, , they were always at each other, right? Or is it the one who just never listens? There she is in her little, I don't know if they're party shoes or sandals, , stomping in the mud puddles, right? But you have to know what your thing is. And then I want to address, so, why all the challenges? This is a very unique developmental period. It's also

A very important developmental period, because it's so foundational. And we now have, actually, a lot of neuroscience and behavioral data, both, because they go together.

Showing where… when pieces are missed, or there's trauma, neglect at these early ages, where it's gonna show up later. So, when bad things happen at different age points, it's gonna map on, later, which I think is helpful to know.

Okay, so part of it is simply this. They have underdeveloped brains, not because they're underdeveloped, but because that's where they are in development. So I shouldn't call it underdeveloped, I should say they are appropriate for development.

Their brains are developing very, very rapidly, and by age 5, you're gonna have 90% of that brain development and brain size that's gonna still be developing over time, but the synapses, all of this early growing is gonna be there.

So, if you see this red part of the brain picture, that prefrontal cortex, that's what's so, important for human development. That's what, I say, makes us adults eventually. I'm gonna talk about it in a minute, but in the 2- to 5-year-old, there's very little development of the part of the brain in the prefrontal cortex. It's a couple pieces of it.

That's gonna control impulses, emotions, attention, those pieces that as children get older, they're more developed at.

Okay, so you have to keep that in mind. When I started doing these talks when How Toddlers Thrive first came out, and before that, the Harvard Center for the Developing Child was saying at that point, because this is all we could image was that there was 7 to 900 neuro… neural connections per second happening in these early years. We now know it's a million, and possibly more. That's because brain imaging has gotten better. And what I mean by that is…

Think about what neurons are from… you don't need to be… I'm not a neuroscientist when I say that. I work with a fabulous developmental neuroscientist. But every second that toddler brain, I think of it as being on fire, right? So the neural connections can happen at any time of life, but

most of them are going to happen early on. So if we get it good early, it's gonna be better for later. So if you think about what this is, these are the links between the neurons that we call synapses.

And so think of it as a connection. You've got neurons, they're there in the brain at birth, and now they're gonna connect. It's one cell speaking to another, one brain cell, that's gonna keep growing these little, you can call them arms, that are gonna connect. And the more connections you have, the more room for plasticity. So you can see here is birth.

There's 6 years when there's so many connections, and then the brain, I think, is smart, and how it was built starts to prune back, because you don't actually need all those connections. But you can see why the toddler is overwhelmed. There's a lot, lot there.

Okay.

So… What does that mean? It means this. Toddler emotions are very intense.

They have emotions, they are firing, they don't know how to handle them. Not because they're bad people, not because they're delayed, but because their brains can't do it yet. You sometimes see this in children who don't show their emotions outward, but go very much inward.

And I always was queuing in my students to, let's make sure that we're paying attention to those children who are withdrawing, we have to respect that, but they're feeling a lot of emotions, and that's getting them to pull back.

Okay, what is this tied to in the brain? Two very important components. One is the amygdala, which is the fear and emotion center at fire, fire, fires. The other is that part of the brain that I said, look at. That's in the front of the, , sort of the forehead, the prefrontal cortex.

The amygdala is coming into action very early in life, not right at birth, interestingly, but very early on.

And the prefrontal cortex, which is going to handle impulse control, all of those cognitive, kind of complex cognitive functions, reasoning, planning, problem solving, that's going to take into the 20s to be fully developed. So if you go backwards that young child is very little development in that prefrontal cortex.

It's a top-down process that eventually the connection between the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex, the prefrontal cortex is going to tamp down the amygdala, say, yes, now is the time to be afraid, now is the time you don't need to be.

You don't have to react that big, but in young children, the amygdala is in control, not the prefrontal cortex. There's the challenge.

Okay, so let me show you just a few little examples. All of this, you're in the field, but I will emphasize that all emotions matter. It takes time to learn them. And just when you think a child has made a leap, which maybe they have, they've gotten better at handling anger.

They're not throwing things as much, they can also take steps backwards, because emotional regulation takes a lot of adult input. When I work with parents, I always say to them, you become their brain, their prefrontal cortex, when stress or emotions get high. It really does take the adult. So I just want to show you just some examples across the world. This is Northern…Japan, after the tsunami. Remember the tsunami in 2011, I was there 2 years later, everything was temporary. There was debris that had been collected, but all over the sides of the road. These beautiful children, 40 of them to 1 adult, I'd never seen anything it.

This little guy has just been left out of play. It's very, very, very cold outside. It's, January, and it's warm inside. So you can see what he's done. He's drawn his sad faces. I just thought this was so beautiful.

And this is his emotions. And then he, a few minutes later, went and played with other children, so this was his way of getting it out. These are 4-year-olds, they are tough.

They've got their armor, they've got their aggression.

Right, it's a very powerful age 4-year-olds. And I will say about that stage of development, when children are showing anger, and they've got their superheroes, their Batmans and Robins, and…

Spider-Mans and everything else. We give boys a lot of outlets to show anger in really, hopefully, constructive, healthy ways.

But think about how hard it is for girls who don't have those play outlets, even when we're very gender-focused, and to really think about, in whatever your practice is, do we give girls enough ways to be angry?

Puppets are great with children, younger children, and even as they get older.

And Jen, just the imaginary things. This is a 3-year-old at the bottom on Halloween, about as adorable as she can be, growling. So, , imaginary play and dress-up gives a lot of outlets to show these emotions that they're both coming to understand and learning to regulate.

Okay.

So then we get into the executive functions. I just want to put this out there, I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it, but if you think about why are emotions so important, and why do we spend so much time with the youngest children on them?

It's because they underlie the ability, really, to be in the world and for what we consider formal learning. what…what the world considers academic learning. So that comes down to these three basic areas, or main areas. That's working memory. So on the one hand, toddlers can be very

good at that, because they can remember all kinds of details. On the other hand, they don't hold… So many pieces right there yet. Cognitive flexibility, so adapting, shifting.

Being flexible, not a hallmark of most toddlers, and then decision making.

So, again, we give young children in classrooms, at home, options and choices simply, because they can't… they can't choose from a big array, but you want your red shirt or your blue shirt as decision-making.

And then that inhibitory control, controlling those impulses, that also feeds into waiting and focusing, and that will go, into emotion regulation as well. So, in order to make efforts, right, to be motivated, which they are in things play, but to be able to really regulate sustained attention, to focus, all those things they're gonna need to do as they get older and they move into schools and schoolwork, is gonna come from keeping feelings in shock, but also then being able to come forward and do what they're supposed to do.

So this… these areas will keep maturing well into, the teen years. So they're just beginning to do it, and needing a lot of reminders.

But the interesting thing about executive function skills is that there's a lot of big data sets that show that these are key for healthy development. So they're predictive of school success, social relationships, and also life and career success well above and beyond IQ. , we're a very IQ-focused world, but it's these other pieces, that again, another thing I bristle at is when I see them referred to as soft skills, I'm , no, these are not soft.

But you need them for all of the pieces we need to really function as individuals and together, in groups and communities. And they're going to be developed through play.

So, let's think about, for a moment, why children play. Here we have children playing, inside and outside. Why do they play? It's what they do all day long. You don't have to, , make them play but, here we have children building communally. They communicate their experiences, they make sense of the world.

They also do what I think to be understood, so when we really watch their play, we can get a sense of who they are. They do this to gain control, and they do it for pleasure and joy. So at the top, you have children who've been building for a week together, that's negotiation, that's coming together, that's cooperating, that's managing a lot of emotions. And at the bottom, we're back to my favorite, right now, favorite two-and-a-half-year-old, who has put his cars and planes and everything together, but one of his objects of vehicles is the iron, and that's what he's holding, and exploring, and that…is the most interesting thing to him. So, right, just when we, set up rules and we think, oh, he's categorized his vehicles, that iron is as important as his vehicles.

Okay.

And then when they participate in the adult world, they are literally…pretending in that world, and that means practicing. Practicing for my day now, and practicing for what I will become.

So this, this, the children sweeping are in China, and this wonderful program called Anji Play

cleanup to them is as joyous as anything else, right? And when children help, , I'll put that in quotes, at home, they're practicing, they're doing… the little girl at the top is in Japan, where, in that classroom, they actually served the meals, so they were scooping soup, hot soup, out of pots into little bowls and handing them off to the children in the 4- and 5-year-old classroom, and here she is just playing it. Then, of course, taking care of babies as well is a big one. And again, you can see this in boys and girls, although we tend. And I just want to show you this little girl, very studiously drawing with her crayon, saying, I sign my name Mommy.

It literally is being in the adult world as she's gaining those fine motor skills, as she's focusing and persisting.

Okay, so I want to take this now into one of the very hard parts, I think, of toddlerhood, which is their incredible need for predictability.

Because the world is big, here he is again, crawling under this bridge slide, and it just shows you how big the world is. This is a very little person exploring with some joy, also figuring out, where do I fit, where don't I fit physically?

But the world is big, and so here's the challenge. For a toddler, the time is always now. Always, always, always, because they have no zero sense of time. Another one that I think is hard for us…

To understand, except that the pandemic gave, I think, many of us, certainly me, a flavor of this, where we lost our structures, we lost our routines, and often time was just this thing that was around us. For a toddler there is no way for them to know what time it is. And what happens, very interestingly, and thankfully, is that their brain starts to get a sense of now, a little bit about before, and a little bit after. And this when the child says, , wait, wait a minute, or in 5 minutes, meaning leave me alone, , because we say to them in 5 minutes.

And you say, oh, come to the dinner table, and they say, in 5 minutes, meaning I'm not coming, but I understand there's something later.

They'll start to say things yesterday, meaning 5 minutes ago, but also 3 months ago when they were with grandparents. They'll say, remember when grandpa was here yesterday? And you're thinking to yourself, oh yeah, that was 3 months ago. But they're telling us.

I realize there's now… I realize there's this thing in the past, and I realize there's this thing in the future, but it's very amorphous, and then little by little, they get gradients. That is literally brain development, it's not something, that they're good or bad about. But what do we do to help them? We give them heads up.

You're gonna have to park the train in a minute so we can get to the bath. Oh, I hear the bath running, it's bath time. We do all of these things to cue them in. Good early childhood classrooms have beautiful, predictable routines. At home, parents have routines. All of those routines are what give safety. Because children work very hard at these ages to bring order. They line things up.

They organize them. You can see the calm in their bodies.

They categorize, they learn categories, right? , all my lizards go here, all my dinosaurs go here, but it's also very calming to them. And look at the glee in this little person when he lines up his bears, right? And you might be thinking, okay, but, right, but children who have developmental challenges, maybe have autism, line up all the time. There's a difference between healthy ordering of the world. I always say to people, if you're concerned, move a few things out of their line and see what they do. Can they adjust? Can they adapt, or is that the end of it for them, and they can't move on?

But toddlers usually can, , you move one away, and you let them know, I'm playing with you, they'll move it back.

Okay, but they need a lot of control, and here's a little person 4 years old, who needed to wear his pajamas. I always used to say to parents, let them wear their pajamas to school, don't battle that. But he would go out if he had his pajamas on. That's comfort, that's safety.

Okay.

So those routines, are what are going to get them through.

And the good thing about the sage is that they've got more symbolic capacities. Language is symbolic, right? Language says this thing in my hand is called a cup, we all know it's a cup. But emotions also have this component of, I have to understand that there's something inside of me that I don't see, but I feel, and it has a label. And then I have to picture that caregiver, mommy, daddy grandparent, I have to be able to picture them, and 2-year-olds on up can do that, so photos, other way… other reminders, , holding on to something of the parent can be very healthy for them. And then they play it out all the time. This is a child popping out from behind a little refrigerator door, scarves, all the ways that children hide themselves and come back, and the adults, the important role for adults is to play it with them. I don't see you, I don't know where you are, I don't see Max, there he is, right? That process keeps reaffirming for them, I can have the control of going away. I can have the control of going… coming back.

It's a reminder. And so children do something called the leaving game. which I will only… I don't know why, particularly in the psychoanalytic field, it's not studied more, but, Elsa first, many years ago, wrote about this, and then I started to document it, at our center. We did some conference presentations on it. It's not easy to catch children in the moment, because just as you get the camera out, they stop. But, parents report this at home all the time

So, before I conclude, I would be remiss to not talk about shame a little bit.

Shame is what comes with a sense of self. Infants don't experience this, they don't really have a strong sense of separate self.

But they're pretty quickly going to. As the child learns about me, and I'm my own person, two important emotions come into play. Shame and also pride. Pride is a self-emotion.

But feelings are very complicated, and so in both these cases, this… the above picture are two children who were fighting over this truck. The teacher keeps showing them there's another one, they're not interested in that. Conflict is social. And the child laying down sort of lost it, didn't get the truck.

And the little girl sitting there did get it, and the teacher said to her, oh, you got it, you got the truck, you can play with it. When you're done, he wants a turn, you can play with it now.

And she's ashamed. And she would show this often. And she literally couldn't play, and the teachers are saying to her, you can have what you need.

Because we want children to feel you can have what you need, and you can be aware of the other. It's both. This other little girl on the side here, this actually makes me laugh, she has just gone over, pushed a child much bigger than she is, the child in green, much bigger, , taller. They're friends, they fight, they play, they fight, they play, and that little girl is sad, sitting in the teacher's lap, and you can see her face. She's , whoops!

And rarely showed shame, and the teacher still went over to her and said, , you can say hi next time, and the teacher's taking care of her, you can say hi if you want to play, to let her know, you don't have to push, but she's kind of , yeah.

And in a way, it's a very healthy sense of self, because when shame sets in as their…core, it destabilizes them, right? Erickson's talked about shame and doubt. We don't… that's the opposite of autonomy. Okay.

So I'm not gonna do that one. I'm gonna end with this. Many of you are working with children with very stressful or traumatic experiences.

Right? There's a loss of control for the child, there's often feelings of blame that they either give to themselves or the adults give to them. Shame, anger comes with that confusion.

And, there's all kinds of ways, whether it's in a classroom, whether it's in an office, that we can support children to play this out, to become the one in control, to become the one giving shots. They do it with, , this evil in their eye, , I'm gonna give you the shot. For those children who have nebulizer masks and are going to the ER, it's very scary. As much as they feel better to be able to breathe, it's very scary to have that on you. If they fled a fire, we have a child who played out a fire game for weeks at school. We had a child who had an emergency on an airplane. We

realized we didn't really have many toy airplanes. We got them, so that he could really play out this emergency landing. He was sick, on the plane, they had to do an emergency landing. , children flee war, they have parents who are being deported. I mean, we're dealing with so many things, and when we give children even a few objects, you don't need much, we say to them, we are here to witness, you are safe here, and I can help you show me what was going on, and I can help you hopefully return to safety, or some sense of it.

Or some sense of control. Oh, casts. Children don't get casted as much, they don't break things anymore, for better or worse. Okay, and then I'm going to end with this. As educators, professionals, mental health people.

Whatever your profession is, you do need a way to debrief experiences. How did you feel? What was it to experience? Whatever it was that the child is showing you? How did you feel towards the child? And you have to be honest.

You have to have a safe place to do this with a supervisor, with colleagues.

We don't always feel good when we're with a child, either because we feel helpless that we're not helping them, or because they're showing us behaviors or push away that's not really likable at the moment. But when we can be honest, we can grow. So you have to identify what that child's behavior or emotions pushes for in you. We bring ourselves, we bring our past. I talk a lot about this in my new book, Raising Resilience. But reflection is important, allowing yourself to be vulnerable is important, and not being isolated is equally important.

So with that, I'm gonna stop. Those are my two books. I think I can stop screen sharing.

Evelyn Blanck: Well, thank you, Dr. Klein, for such a sensitive and wonderful webinar, and really taking us inside the world of a toddler. So, before I feed you some questions, I just would to remind everybody, please do fill out the evaluation. We very much want your feedback, and it really helps direct future trainings.

So, a few questions. You talk about the importance of predictability, routines, and order. When is the best time to introduce schedules?

Tovah P. Klein: Great. It's always a great question. So, the earlier the better. I mean, not with newborns, forget it, just take it through the day. But we even do this with infants as they start to regulate. And routines don't have to be rigid. So, I say routines in a classroom, you see the little schedule, but at home, the routines around meals, around bedtime, around getting dressed, anything that the child is going to do every day at home, at school, in your office, what's their entry, what's their exit, it's never too early to introduce routines. But what I want to say about routines is.

When you have them, it teaches flexibility, because when something changes, , oh, today we're actually not reading books at school because we have a special visitor, then tomorrow you go back to reading books at that time.

So, it's the routines that allow children to eventually become flexible.

Evelyn Blanck: That's fabulous. So, I love this next question, because it really is someone trying to process a life experience they had with their own toddler. So, it said, I put a baby gate up at the bathroom door this morning so I could blow dry my hair without my young toddler running around the bathroom and getting into stuff. He stood outside and cried, even as he was less than a foot away from me, and I was passing him stuff to play with, and ruffling his hair and otherwise engaging him.

I wonder what was going on for him.

Tovah P. Klein: I love that! It's a perfect example, because there you are, you're giving him probably what he needs, and he's mad.

How dare you leave me out of the space that I want to be in, even though you're inches from me? And you allow them to have the anger. That's actually a great toddler example.

Evelyn Blanck: Yeah, I love it, that's great. So somebody else asked, can you speak to the difference between shame and guilt?

Tovah P. Klein: I can try.

So, , I say shame is this piece of us that, in a way, is healthy.

Because shame keeps us honest. , why would you stop at that light or, , stop sign if there was no other cars and no police present, right? So, in a wake, it makes us adults and it keeps us healthy.

And when children show it to us, , that first time, if you can think about it with your own toddler, where maybe you said, no, no, no, something, put up a limit, and they put their little head down, and then you go, oh, they're feeling shame, that tells you they're human, and they're connected to us, and they want to do well.

When we shame them, it's different, because we're kind of filling their bucket with it.

Guilt is something that comes from probably… Every religion, every culture, I don't know of one, maybe there is one that doesn't have this. Guilt is what we get in response to our actions or our inaction, and it tends to hold us back. I always say to parents, I don't think there's anything healthy in guilt unless it motivates you, sometimes guilt gets us to do something, but if you're doing something over and over out of guilt, , oh, I better be kind because otherwise I'll look a bad person, that's what guilt is.

I think it's a kind of corrosion that doesn't help us. And…, when we think about being a parent, we feel guilty all the time. , we're always letting our kids down. And so, if guilt is in there all the time, then you try almost too hard, and you miss the point.

Whereas Winnicott talked about good enough parenting, we talked about good enough mothers, because that's all that existed in the 1950s, but…not that dads weren't there, but when we talk about good enough parenting, that's what gets away from the guilt. Yeah, you're gonna make mistakes.

Yeah, you're gonna not do it right. You can correct that. And so, what guilt does is stops us from correcting, but just, , kind of running, running, trying to be perfect. And if you want to get off that perfect trajectory you say… you can actually dump guilt. Shame is much more internal, and kind of eats away at us, and it's a process to recognize, why am I ashamed? Where does it come from? Hint, it comes from your past, your own upbringing, even from loving parents, your own religion or culture. And it's very internal, and it can really destroy us. It can lead us to very negative behaviors. I hope that says a little bit.

Evelyn Blanck: I've been very helpful, thank you. Another question. Many families I work with want to start daycare around 15 to 18 months because they worry their children are too attached to me. I often discuss bonding, attachments, safety, and exploration, anything else I can share that would both reassure and explore new resources? Can you address that?

Tovah P. Klein: Yeah, that's a great question. , around that age, children often, not all children follow this, but children often become more clingy.

And who's ever asking that probably knows, when parents say attached, what they mean is clingy. It's the first thing I would say to my college students, , clinginess is not attachment, let's, , talk about what attachment is. So, being clingy is hard on a parent. But I think one of the things you can help parents understand is that attachment is never bad. Clingy behaviors might be frustrating, maybe the parent needs a little break, can they do some…, time away, even if it's for an hour, that somebody else cares for the child.

But separating at childcare, if they need it, great, and hopefully can find a good childcare place. But very young toddlers don't need to be in group care. There's nothing that says you have to be social in a group at this age. Which is why, if they are in group care, you want to make sure it's really tuned-in care, and hopefully that's available. But to say to them, , the socialization of a young child really starts a little bit later, socialization with peers. And so they don't need that. There's no real benefit, to that… to that…to a program, right? I always tell parents, I could save you a lot of money, you don't have to do those group classes.

But you could also say to them, , if you're concerned about them socially, get together with cousins or a friend in the park, the home can be fraught, but okay, in the cold, you might want to be at home. But get together with one other toddler, but they're not going to really play at that age together in the way that we think of being together.

But to assure a parent there's no such thing as too much attachment. The clinginess can be hard, and I would separate those two.

Evelyn Blanck: That's great, and somebody just said, I just love the phrase you just used, attachment is never bad.

Tovah P. Klein: Yeah.

Evelyn Blanck: , and I think everybody struggles to find the right time in the right place, so… Yeah, yeah.

So I'm not seeing any other questions, but I just want to say there were a lot of accolades in the chat, and we certainly will send out references to your books in our post-announcement, and thank you so much for today. Oh, I got one more question here, how's that? Okay.

So, how to manage a two and a half to three-year-old child who goes to daycare, pre-K, but shows resistance in going, teacher advise parent to just stick with it.

Tovah P. Klein: Yeah. So, I'm gonna assume it's a good place where the teachers are caring, because that's always the question. This is a young age. This is the separation program I did, was this age. You can stick with it.

If you give them something of yours to take with you, that can be a family photo, , a little handkerchief if you have those, something that belongs to the parent.

If the drop-off really is you have a little routine, you go in, you say goodbye, usually they want to separate to a person, so you take them over to a caregiver, they're a teacher, and that you're then hearing the child calms down in a reasonable amount of time, and then is moving forward. That will come if there are loving, accepting caregivers.

So it's really kind of evaluating the situation, but yes, some children, it takes a long time of being reassured, mommy or daddy always comes back, and then see how they are at pickup. I mean, if they're happy to see you, and they seem …they've had a good enough day, then yeah, you can stick with it. Crying or protesting your leaving is not bad. I would also play that out at home. You can play it out with puppets or with each other.Parent leaves, parent comes back.

Evelyn Blanck: Somebody said along those lines, what age should parents think about, having them socialize with other kids?

Tovah P. Klein: So, 2 is a good age, although it's very conflictual. So if you're not in a program where somebody else is handling it, I say just have one 2-year-old have a few toys, , but two of everything, or go to the playground or park, because it's always easier out there. Don't expect them to really play. It's the threes, the young moving into the older threes, who are all about peers. They want to be with them, and the four world is a peer world.

So it's, , it's at 2.5 to 3 where they start to get really interested in other children, and then the older threes are full-on peers for most children.

Evelyn Blanck: Great, so I'm going to end with one last question. Any advice for a loving parent who is now temporarily only able to see children once a week for visitation?

Tovah P. Klein: Gosh, I work with a lot of these parents, I'm sorry. Yes, I think having routines and rituals, , what's your greeting ritual, what's your goodbye ritual, those are important. Doing some of the same things each time you see your child, so there's some repetition. Letting your child know, here's the picture of you and me in my house or my apartment.

I think of you when you're not here, and always letting them know when you're gonna see them again. I'm gonna see you again soon, I'm gonna pick you up just I did. So all of those

Coming and goings that you do every day when you're with your child matter that much more when you're seeing them less.

Evelyn Blanck: That is so helpful. Thank you so much. This was really wonderful. I want to remind everybody, please do fill out the evaluation, and a lot of accolades in the chat box. We really appreciate all the input. Thank you. Take care, everyone. Be well. Bye-bye.