

Ask the Expert

J. RONALD LALLY

ZERO TO THREE Board Members share their expertise and insight regarding important issues affecting infants, toddlers, and their families.

MEET: J. Ronald Lally, EdD, co-director, Center for Child and Family Studies, WestEd, Sausalito, California; executive producer, Program for Infant/Toddler Care, video-based training program in collaboration with the California Department of Education. Dr. Lally, a founding member of ZERO TO THREE, possesses significant expertise in child care training and in national and state policy that affects young children. Dr. Lally's research deals with social-emotional development in infancy and the impact of early intervention on adult functioning. He is the executive producer of 21 infant-toddler training videos/DVDs. The videos/DVDs and accompanying print materials of the program are the most widely distributed infant-toddler caregiver training materials in the country.



Why Play Matters

Q: How do we get policymakers to understand the importance of play?

A: One way to do this is by documenting all the important things that babies are learning through play and specifying the particular mastery taking place. For example, when a 10-month-old child is sitting in a corner playing with a basket of materials, she bangs them, rubs them, gums them, and rakes them across the floor. To many adults this looks like mindless activity but for the baby this banging and gumming help her learn about the categories that objects fall into—hard things, soft things, sticky things, heavy things, things you can squeeze. This child is building, through early play, information about both the attributes and functions of things. We need to make this type of learning visible to the policymaker.

It is our role as infant advocates to let others know the importance of the work that is being done during infancy. For example, as a toddler rolls a ball back and forth with an adult, many adults feel that nothing intellectual is happening. They may want to get the child to move on to something more important such as practice with the precursors of reading or mathematics. Yet through play with a ball the child is exploring the important lessons of distance and relative size. The ball doesn't get smaller when it moves away, nor bigger when it moves nearer. Through play the young child comes to understand gravity, how things move and fit in space, cause and effect relationships, how to use his body as a tool to get what he wants, and thousands of other important lessons. It is imperative then that we document for parents, policymakers, and other adults the intellectual, language, social, emotional, perceptual, and motor lessons being learned right before their eyes. We need to take many more photos and videos of babies learning, label those images by naming the specific lessons being learned, and share that information with those making policy about early childhood curriculum and practice.

Q: How important is play in the development of infants and toddlers?

A: What we have learned in recent years is that babies are born ready to learn and do it naturally and easily. They come into the world as curious, motivated learners, seeking meaning, wired to learn language, and inclined to form relationships. This natural inclination is triggered best in settings where all their domains of development can be engaged—intellectual, language, social, emotional, perceptual, and motor. The prime setting for this triggering is play. Play lets a young child follow her inborn learning agenda. Research has found that playful language—fun exchanges with those around them—lead babies to have great vocabularies and good social skills later in life. It has also been found that the creation of interesting environments that spur exploration does more for intellectual development than the teaching of specific lessons.

As opposed to older children, say a freshman in high school who can sit in algebra class for 50 minutes and focus on one topic, babies do better with less lesson focus. They need to be more in charge of the particular lesson they are learning at that particular time. For the first couple of years of life they have their own learning agenda and religiously follow it. For example, they will not explore an environment until they have their security needs met. They will not always be interested in or get much out of the lesson that you have planned for them if at that point in their development they are consumed with other lessons. Play suits this self-directed learning style much better than adult-directed activity.

Play is also important to young children for another reason. Being allowed to play lets young children feel that their natural inclinations for acting in the world are mostly reasonable and appropriate. Although they are being socialized by those who care for them, they are not constantly interrupted, stopped, or pushed to do other things. This is a great

message for a baby to get as he begins to develop his first sense of self.

Q: How would you define an adult's role in the play of babies?

A: If you watch babies closely you'll find it is difficult to differentiate between their work and their play. It is adults and older children who make this distinction. Infant play is exploration, experimentation, imitation, and adaptation. Babies seem to be playfully exploring during every waking moment and learning from those explorations. Babies take play very seriously. If you watch a baby's face while engaged in play you'll find concentration, puzzlement, surprise, amazement, and many other expressions as she is occupied with thoughts and actions of discovery and accomplishment.

As adults we need to be careful that we don't impose our distinctions between play and work on babies. Most adults have the tendency to see play as only fun; something to which appropriate learning experiences need to be added in order to have value. Others treat play as something that adults should stay away from because it should be strictly the domain of children. The role of the adult in baby play however should be somewhere in between these two extremes. The fact is that there is no such thing as free play for a very young child. Adults create the environments in which play takes place. They select the materials. They decide on the size of groups. They set down the social ground rules for interaction—no hitting, no destruction of property. And just by their presence they encourage, expand, model, and provoke learning. The key things for the adult to learn about the role they should play in the play of a baby is when to join in, when to hold back, when to help, and when to watch. Knowing when to do these things comes from a respect for the child's nondifferentiated definition of work and play and an understanding of all the babies are learning through their play.