



Professional Development
Transcript of Podcast No. 1 from the online course *The First Six Weeks of Preschool*

Hello. I'm Beth from Teaching Strategies, and I'd like to welcome you to The Best Time of the Year. The Most Exciting Time of Year. And probably The Busiest Time of Year.

What time is it? Yes, it's time to think about the beginning of school, and I am here with the first in our four-part podcast series from the *First Six Weeks of Preschool* professional development course.

In each part of our podcast series, we're going to talk about a different aspect of ensuring a successful beginning to the school year, from the people to the places to the times that are important for preschool children, their teachers, and their families.

But before we talk about people, places, and times, let's first take a moment to look at some of the IDEAS that go into creating a high-quality preschool program, and, in particular, the ideas that go into creating a *great start to the school year*.

What do I mean about the IDEAS for a great start? Well, I'm talking about the theory, the research, the foundational concepts, and the more-than-forty years of experience that've gone into producing *The Creative Curriculum® for Preschool*, from which this professional development course was adapted.

Ideas like the power of positive messages... and the best ways to gather and store your classroom materials... and how you can use open-ended questions to extend children's thinking—concepts that aren't just SOME ideas but are actually really BIG IDEAS.

For our first two podcasts, I want to focus on just two of those big ideas. The first is assessment of learning, and the second is classroom rules.

Now, I realize that when you hear things like "assessment" and "rules" that you're probably already thinking about how absolutely *boring* this is going to be—or perhaps you're thinking

about how *intimidating* both those topics can be, especially when you are facing the challenges of actually implementing them—or perhaps you're thinking that these topics are really rather *trivial afterthoughts* when compared to other major mandates of your program, such as, say, individualizing learning or guiding children's social-emotional development.

Well, all this actually leads me to my first point about these two particular BIG IDEAS—specifically that they *shouldn't be boring*. Or intimidating. Or trivial. And if they are, then you're probably not thinking about them in the right way. So, let me explain.

But before I do, I want to step away from those BIG IDEAS and take a moment to offer some *general comments* about this professional development course.

If you are listening to this podcast—and clearly you are—unless perhaps you are *reading* the written transcript attached to it—it's because you're taking the online professional development course called *The First Six Weeks of Preschool*, which means that, in all likelihood, you are a preschool teacher. We want you to know that everything that went into this course—from the biggest ideas to the tiniest details—all of it was created with the singular goal of supporting YOU in starting the school year off right. We wanted to help guide you in being very intentional in the ways that you set up the physical environment of your classroom, in the plans that you make as well as the daily schedule that those plans fit into, and in the many ways that you communicate with children and families and build the relationships with them that will be more important than anything else you can do as a teacher.

And we wanted to do all this in a way that provided detailed guidance—through both a solid research base and an approachable style—but that still allowed you and the children and their families to make this your own, to reflect who and where you are.

For example, did you know that something as simple as *sitting on the floor* while you take a good, long look around your classroom can make an enormous difference in how you organize materials and display children's work? Because now you're viewing it all at a child's eye-level, instead of an adult's. You are quite literally seeing things the way that children will.

Now it may be that, as you work your way through this course about the beginning of the year, you frequently stop and think, “Wow! THAT'S a great idea for ANY time of the year.” Well... yeah. That's part of the joy and power of a great start, that you put in place practices and routines and expectations that you can rely on and expand upon all year long, because, let's face it, it's so much easier to build something substantial when you start with a solid foundation. That's true in construction, and it's true in education.

With that thought in mind, let's now return to the focus of this podcast, the assessment of learning and, in particular, formative assessment in the preschool classroom.

When done well, the practice of formative assessment holds incredibly important powers, including the power to inspire, engage, excite, and promote both independence and interdependence.

Formative assessment is the process of gathering information about children's development and learning and using that knowledge to inform your planning for future learning experiences. In the early childhood classroom, formative assessment is most powerful when conducted through observation of children's everyday, play-based demonstrations of their knowledge, skills, and abilities, which allows you to build an authentic understanding of what children actually know and can do.

As a career-long educator of young children, I can think of nothing more compelling than truly knowing a child and using that knowledge to intentionally scaffold that child's development and learning. When you think about individualizing learning for children—about using their strengths, supporting their interests, and meeting their needs as *individual children*—you realize that formative assessment is actually the *only* means for making that happen.

Without formative assessment, you're really just relying on chance. You're guessing and hoping that your instruction will benefit *all* children without planning for *each* child.

But *with* formative assessment. . . *with formative assessment*. . . you gain the information you need to genuinely and effectively scaffold children's development and learning across all developmental domains and all areas of content.

So, assessment *isn't* an afterthought. It is, rather, the very foundation of teaching. It's not what happens at the *end* of teaching; it's what happens *before you ever plan* to teach.

You may be wondering, then, how you plan for the first day of school. Well, you do that by learning as much as you can about the children in your class before that first day arrives. Read the documentation that families completed when the child was enrolled in your program. If he's been in school before, read the documentation from his former teachers. Make phone calls or home visits or invite families to write you a letter about their child. Ask them if there is anything special *they* think you should know about their child. Ask them about their children's interests, their preferences, their dislikes, their temperament, their schedules. Ask if the child has any special medical needs, such as food allergies or difficulty sleeping, that can have an impact on the child's school day. Ask them how their child *feels* about the prospect of the school year starting. Is she happy? Eager? Excited? Worried?

Anything you can do to help you get to know the children will also help inform your planning for their arrival.

Once the children start school, begin looking for authentic demonstrations of their knowledge, skills, and abilities right away so that, little by little, through observation, documentation, reflection, and intentional planning, you'll be able to build a complete yet ever-changing picture of their development and learning.

I can think of no better way to start the school year—nothing more motivational or inspiring or engaging—than realizing the power you hold to shape children's lives.

Now THAT'S a BIG IDEA.

Join me next time in Podcast 2, as I talk about some PEOPLE who are important in the lives and work of children at school, including the BIG IDEA of how to use the rules in your classroom to help you turn a group of young children into a caring community of learners.