

This past August, early childhood education expert, author and consultant Cindy Terebush sat with Sr. TAS Barbara Thornton to share some information and ideas about her book (*Teach the Whole Preschooler: Strategies for Nurturing Developing Minds*), her work, and Parent Education:

Barbara: As you know, taking part in Grow NJ Kids sometimes results in curriculum changes which may concern parents. What are some ways program administration and teachers can help parents understand the necessary changes?

Cindy: Whatever the requirements are for each state, using a research-based curriculum is a common change that centers have to enact. The best way to help parents understand it, is to experience it. A huge part of our job today is to educate the parents, in every which way: in person, in writing, by inviting them in, having them experience a day with you, or even more than one day.

Invite parents into the classroom as participants. I want them to participate in the day so if I invite parents in, I would include them in shared writing; "What do you know about this topic? What do you want to know about this topic?" Explain how the learning crosses into literacy, math and science.

Use pictures of their kids - that attracts them. Put up things that the parents can see like documentation panels of children doing experiments and explorations, and quotes, what the children know, what they don't know, webs of their learning. Almost so much should be visible that parents are overwhelmed by the information.

Share what the children are learning live. There's an impact when parents can see their child having higher level of conversations, so we need to find a way to communicate that. They aren't there to see it so we need to find a way to show them.

Adults need evidence. There's evidence out there - go on Google, to find the evidence that this curriculum works. You will see the evidence and research. You can't just tell them, "This is research based." We have to give them the evidence. And it has to be all the time, every year, on-going give them the evidence that this works

Project Approach is different than making crafts. Doing a craft is not evidence of learning. It's evidence of learning how to glue. When children are involved in crafts, I ask them, "What are you doing?" and they respond: "We're gluing."

A craft is anything when an adult has a product in mind. Art is when a child is doing something, and I don't know what they have in mind because I had no product in mind. For crafts, children are going through the motions.

There are more creative ways to learn how to glue - just put it out don't say a word, just put it out. Crafts, such as everyone trying to make the same penguin, are a waste of children's educational time. If people are worried about children getting an education at this age, we must focus on what works best.

(read more about this topic on Cindy's Blog: Are the Days of Homemade Preschool Curriculum Ending?

<http://cindytereubush.blogspot.com/2018/07/are-days-of-homemade-preschool.html>)

Barbara: Do you think directors are comfortable with the “project approach”?

Cindy: Directors understand that it's research based and there's evidence for it. They know that it's developmentally appropriate. Their biggest fear is how the parents are going to react.

Change is hard, and there are a variety of levels that we see, when you're talking about people having to shift to research based curriculum. There are people who have been working in classrooms for many years, and for them the change is hard. They've done things a certain way for a long time.

We all come from the same place. We've all done things like “letter of the week” and “calendar”, but that doesn't necessarily make it the right thing based on what we know now about how children learn. We have to evolve with what we know. Telling that to the teachers helps: I tell them, I taught for many years and we did weekly themes, and we were proud of them, but we didn't understand that what we were doing wouldn't pique children's curiosity.

We didn't understand that a child can't be curious about something they haven't experienced. It's a simple thought – *“How can they picture something they don't understand?”* Many teachers have trouble grasping this. If I say to children who have never been to Australia – “We set up the classroom to look like Australia” they don't know what I'm talking about. Recently I saw a school doing a theme week of camping with two-year-olds: they set up the classroom and set up blankets. These children now probably think camping is setting up blankets in a building, and talking about things they don't understand. They don't have context. As an adult, we have context. We are higher level thinkers who can be curious about things we've never seen but young children are not. Children who are two-, three-, four-years-old don't have enough life experience or the brain development to be curious about things that aren't part of their world now. Getting people to grasp this is difficult. Topics need to be from the child's real world. We have to always remember that children this age are not yet executive thinkers.

It's different from place to place, but this notion that children have to have experience to be curious about something is universal. Children haven't had to read a book and imagine a setting. Their books have pictures. They do a lot of their own pretend, but it's based on their own experience. They aren't pretending things they have never experienced. Teachers say, “I'm trying to expand their world”, but you can't expand it if you aren't starting with what they know.

We spend a great deal of time trying to make children older than they are. People have forgotten. In kindergarten I was playing, and finger-painting, and look at me now. I am fine, I'm a fairly successful human being. And they will be too, if we do what's right for them.

Barbara: You have been a teacher, director and consultant, and now an author! Can you tell us what led you to write about this topic?

Cindy: I had written a blog, and for other venues, and I enjoyed doing that. I had been asked to do that, including 4 articles for Maria Shriver, "Shriver Report: A Woman's Nation Pushes Back from the Brink." (<http://shriverreport.org/people/cindy-terebush/>) I had written brief articles, and I think, like a lot of us, I toyed with that idea – "I think I have a book in me".

I was speaking at the Young Child Expo in NYC. When I was done I was sitting in the lobby, and got an email from Deborah Malmud from W.W. Norton. She said she was the Vice President of Professional Books, and asked if I had ever considered putting my talks into books. I don't think you say no to that. I told her, "I'll be honest with you, I don't have a manuscript". She said, "I don't care, I would like to talk with you; we think you have something valuable to say." I asked how she heard about me, and she told me they get copies from the conference, and she had circled my topic, "Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Literacy," and felt it was relevant. She went on-line, saw I could write, saw I had written for Maria Shriver, and that people were tweeting me from the talk. She said, "We don't have to convince you to go out and do talks. You have something valuable to say, and already have an audience." She actually helped me a great deal. She sent me an outline and coached me to write a proposal for their board. I thought, when they reject it, it will still be a good experience. The email came a few weeks later: "They have accepted your proposal, attached is a contract." It was a little bit of luck and a little bit of work. It was my path. I was not a big believer that everyone has a path, but I am now. Just follow it, you don't know where it leads next. You have to get yourself out in the public eye, then follow your path.

Go out and speak at local region conferences. I was part of the Directors Academy, and Joey Tivenan-Mackintosh was my instructor. She liked the presentation I did for the class and was planning a regional conference. She said, "All you have to do is do it once and if you hate it you don't have to do it again." That was 10 or more years ago, and I never stopped because people hired me from there. It got bigger and more and bigger and more. I saw Joey recently, and I said, I give her credit for my whole career. I give her lots of credit for convincing me to do that.

And Deborah, the publisher for saying it's okay that I don't have a manuscript. And even Maria Shriver. I was watching the Today show, and they said something I disagreed with, and they said, if you want to comment, tweet us. So I gave it a try, I tweeted and tagged Matt Lauer, and her, and I put a link to an article. Then I got a private message from Maria Shriver's editors. They said, we are reading your blogs, and we wondered if you would write some articles for her report.

It was a combination of being in the right place at the right time. But you have to consistently put yourself out there. I have to know all I can about social media. Yes, it's hard work, and you need to be willing to be vulnerable in public, but there's also this tiny touch of magic that has to happen. That's what I think, a combination of all the above. My life is crazy, but in the best possible way.

Barbara: You have a lot of great suggestions and approaches for communication with parents. Why did you focus on parents in this book designed for Early Childhood Educators?

Cindy: I showed a rough draft of the manuscript to the publisher, I was thinking something for parents would be a separate thing, but they said that parents could still be reading the book. I have found since that they do. At the publisher's suggestion, I dug back into the manuscript and synthesized what I thought would work. It was a collaboration with the publishers.

Parents don't know what good education is. There are certain generations who didn't have preschool, so they don't have the experience or remember the experience, or they only remember lectures from high school or college. I think there is a shift happening across the board in different ways. We have a false perspective because of television. We had shows that depicted early childhood education classrooms, when a teacher said, "We will do this," and the children all went together. We forget that television is an illusion. When they said, "Let's all march over here," they all marched over there. It isn't how it should be.

People giving tours at preschools, say they can't have toys on the floor. I hear this a lot. Children should be able to come back and continue what they were doing, and continue what they were trying to figure out. They aren't allowed to have a lot of things on the floor. I don't know why they don't see that an early childhood classroom should be organized chaos.

When I do consulting, there's a lot of teachers saying, "They said..." and I always say, "They who?" Sometimes it is three directors ago, or the assistant director who isn't here anymore. Or sometimes it is the current director, so I go to administrative staff and they say, "No I didn't say that." I'm not sure what the answer to that is. No one hears the same thing. People hear what they want to hear. My job as a consultant is to go back and tell the teachers, "No you don't have to do that." I try to bridge the gap between the staff and the directors. I send emails to schools and ask administration to forward to the teachers, and they forward to staff, which is essentially their consent to what I tell their teachers.

Barbara: Do you have any advice for teachers and caregivers who have to deliver "bad news" to parents?

Cindy: First and foremost, you have to come from a place of concern for this child and put aside concerns for your classroom. It's tough but you have to. Focus on getting extra support now. The difference it makes is tremendous. And the record doesn't necessary follow them for the rest of their lives. There are checkpoints as the child gets older. A child may be in Early Intervention, and you may need to pursue Special Education beyond that, but what follows the child is up to the parents, up to a certain age. There isn't a fear at this age of labelling, unless the parent chooses that. The

parent has choices. Let them know, in the early years the choice is yours. That will change as the child gets older.

We have to be reminded to have empathy for the parents we are approaching. No one gives birth to a baby and thinks, someone is going to tell me this child needs extra help. If you are really lucky, you have 18 years to let go of your dreams for your child. Some people have up to 24 years to let go of the dreams. When you come to a parent of a child of two years, you are asking them to give up those dreams, and shift their thinking of what is going to be for the child. It's a shift of their thinking that has to take place pretty soon after birth. I have a lot of empathy for that.

Their path is going to be different than mine – it doesn't mean it is going to be terrible. I have to respect that. I can't go into the conversation thinking this is going to be terrible. And we can't force them into taking the journey. It can take some time, and that's okay. They don't have to take the journey right now. We have to know when parents aren't there yet, just like we know that with children. You may need to say, "I will keep an eye on things, and let you know what I see, and touch base, and let me know what you see at home". We have to stop looking at each other's journeys as if one is better than another.

Barbara: How important is it that parents and caregivers are in agreement regarding children's development? Do you think they must agree about children's discipline?

Cindy: I think it's very helpful when people are in agreement, but I think it's not realistic for people always to be in agreement. With boundaries and behavior, children can understand that there are behaviors that are different for different settings. It's a human thing to learn. Regarding what's developmentally appropriate, children will know in my setting they will feel safe and secure, and they can know it about other settings, but they can know the approach is different for different people. We can tell parents, "Let me teach you how we do it here, and why" and they can take it and run with it or not. We cannot control them. Let go of the notion that we can control the parents. But we have to continue to educate them.

We have to listen to them because their culture could be dictating something very different. Parents may say, "This is why we don't do this at home," and we can't reject this. For example, if a parent says, "I give my child dittos at home," that's their option and I wouldn't fight it, but I'd tell them, "this is why we don't... and you are welcome to do what you like." I think people respect that. It's when you battle people that there is a problem.

Barbara: What do you think parents' biggest concern is with their children these days?

Cindy: I think it depends where you are, based on geography, socio-economics. There isn't just one concern across the board. It varies very much. There are some settings where their primary concern is safety, and a bit less if their child will excel. I think everyone wants their child to do well and then different people have different top priorities. There's a lot of concern their child won't excel, they won't be at the top of

the class. Some people need perspective when we are talking about preschool. When consulting on Developmentally Appropriate Practice, I explain that the child needs to feel safe, secure, and have their physical needs met. They need love and belonging, then self-esteem. Then they can be the best person they can be.

Ask a grown-up if they've ever lost their job. The thought of, "How will I put food on the table?" outweighs everything. If a child is concerned about using the bathroom, they can't think of anything else (read more about Maslow's Hierarchy of needs: <https://hierarchybymaslow.weebly.com/preschool-period.html>)

Barbara: What was your favorite part about working in early childhood education?

Cindy: It's such a big question. Still my favorite part is the frequency I get to laugh with children. They say the most amazing things. There are settings I go into two times a month. The children know I'll sit and play with them. All they know is that we're playing. One child recently said to me, "Welcome back, it's lovely to see you." They're so cute. I love to watch them learn and grow. If I can just sit and giggle with them, it makes my day. And you get to see a lot as a consultant. The teachers learn to trust you when they know you're not going to throw them under the bus. I enjoy that trust because it enables me to help them improve.

Barbara: What qualities do you think are most important for teachers of young children to have?

Cindy: Willing to forever learn. And the ability to put that learning into practice. You need to be able to take professional development back into practice, and implement it. Ongoing consulting has a lot of value, and allows teachers to implement what they learn. I do training, professional development sessions, speak at conferences, write, and I know only a small percentage is used. But I also know there are certain things that stuck with people. You just never know the impact it will have. I was speaking and a woman in the back of the room, said she came to give testimony: "That thing you taught about circle time was the best thing I learned about being a teacher." I know it is a small percentage that is sticking, unless I can go into the classroom and demonstrate and guide them. Professional development credits should be given for learning in the classroom. Schools can seek grants to help with getting consultants.

Barbara: What changes would you like to see in the field of Early Childhood Education in the next 10 years

Cindy: Here's what I would like to see: salaries that match the important work that is done. Who is more important than those working with the youngest learners? They need to be compensated, and have a living wage.

More advocacy for Developmentally Appropriate Practice. I know NAEYC does this, but I am disheartened when people don't know what NAEYC is.

Far more PR to parents, Public Service Announcements to teach them what is developmentally appropriate. A shift to valuing process over project.

There should be standards for qualification in the field. People get upset, because they worry about what will happen with their job. There should be pathways to be credentialed, but there is value to education; teaching is a skill set. Just because you know how to put a curriculum in place, doesn't mean you understand the brain development behind it. We need to frame it in a way that it is an opportunity for people.

From birth to age eight, all over early childhood education, we need someone with a teaching credential, this includes infant toddler providers. There is an infant toddler credential in NJ, but it needs to be the standard.

Barbara: What's next for you?

Cindy: I'm doing a Podcast with my friend and colleague Alison Kentos, and we are having such a blast. We think we are adorable; I don't know if others do but we surely hope so. It's available everywhere, and no more than 15 minute per segment, because we know you have limited time. If you subscribe it will be automatically downloaded every other Monday. More are coming. We call it, "How Preschool Teachers Do it" because that's what parents say to us the most, "How do they do it?" It is for parents and professionals.

My consulting is continuing to expand. And down the road, I imagine I will get tired of traveling; eventually I can see myself as an adjunct at college. I don't want to tie myself to that now – I am enjoying the travel.

I took a giant leap of faith. I had been building this consulting part of my career for years. It was a long thinking and planning process. There came a time when I knew I would regret it if I didn't. I still live by the idea, whatever I need to do I'm just going to roll with it, and not try to not feel like I have to control what happens – which isn't easy. Where ever it leads is probably where I'm meant to be. I couldn't have predicted where I would be today. And it's crazy, but in the best possible way.

Cindy's Website: <https://www.helpingkidsachieve.com/>