

## **Transcript: Sharing the Care: How Partnering with Your Child’s Caregiver Supports Healthy Development Featuring Jerlean Daniel, Ph.D.**

Hello and welcome to ZERO TO THREE ‘s exciting new podcast series for parents: Little Kids, Big Questions, made possible with the generous support of MetLife Foundation. ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit organization devoted to the health and development of babies, toddlers and their families.

I’m Annie Pleshette Murphy, a ZERO TO THREE board member, and the host of this series, which will showcase interviews with leading child development experts on the issues most pressing to parents today, based on findings from a recent parent survey ZERO TO THREE conducted also with support from MetLife Foundation.

I am pleased to welcome Dr. Jerlean Daniel who will join us today to talk about quality child care and how parents and child care providers can work together to effectively share the care of young children. Jerlean is the executive director of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and was the director of a child care center for 18 years. Jerlean, I have to say that I find when I am talking to parents about quality child care, one of the big questions is what are we talking about? What does quality child care look like?

- A: Well, it’s an opportunity where the—the parent and the caregiver have open two-way communication, that is that there’s nothing too large or small to talk about, even if each party feels a little uncomfortable with it, they’ve built a relationship and—or in the process of building the relationship they do so with open, honest communication, umm, and each really trying to understand the other’s point of view.
- Q: Yeah. I’m—I’m—I’m actually gonna interrupt you, ‘cause what’s so fabulous is that when—in asking that question I of course thought you were gonna launch into a whole list of statistics, you know, the way ratio of childcare provider to child should be this, and the—you know, there should be clean places for you to wash your hands, and, umm, so I’m—I actually am noting, and, umm, I want you to keep talking about this, that really what you’re focusing on is this relationship.
- A: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And one of the fastest ways to build a relationship is for a parent to find a caregiver who is curious and anxious to know your child—really know who your child is. Parents really resonate when caregivers are clearly observing, asking questions, sharing information that they see. That tells—says to a parent, “Yes, I may be with

- a group of children, but I'm keeping an eye out in particular for your child, because I want to know who this is." Uh, and that's—that will make a relationship soar.
- Q: Yes. Right. Yes. Definitely. I mean, I think what would make a relationship sore, spelled the other way, is if in fact there isn't this kind of openness. And—and more than that, there isn't a kind of respect for what the other person is doing. I'm thinking very much about the situation in this country where in my opinion we don't pay childcare providers a respective wage. I think, uh, parents, uh, unfortunately sometimes think of it as just, you know, babysitter as opposed to an early childhood educator.
- A: Well, I think if a parent is fortunate enough to have, uh, as a caregiver for their infant or toddler a professional, that is somebody who has chosen this field, what they will find is that they will pretty quickly get over the notion of this is a babysitter, because the kinds of things that—that caregiver will pay attention to in terms of the whole child's development and the explanations that that person can give to the parent for various stages of a child's life—you know, when they're really clinging, or when they're teething, or whatever it is. They soon will come to respect the—the knowledge base that the—that the caregiver offers.
- Q: Yeah. And I think also part of what you're touching on is if you're fortunate enough to find someone like that, or to find a center that hires people like that, umm, that they—they really also in addition to kind of understanding where your child is at, they understand where you're at. I mean there's no question that, you know, the heartbreak of dropping your child off for the first time is something all of us who have your kids in child care know. It's just really, really tough. And, you know, if you have someone who is not only making you feel that your child will be safe, but is understanding that, you know, separation anxiety may be more on your side of the equation than on your child's, that that—that—that can be also really, really important.
- A: Well, I think what you said is really important, because the clientele, if you will of a caregiver is not only the child, but the parents as well. And she has to look after the needs of both of those generations, parent and child.
- Q: Of course in the ideal situation, I think you do have someone who is aware that—that the whole family is affected when the child goes into care; that they're there to support the whole family that they're not competing. Something that a lot of parents suffer from is this idea that the childcare provider, or the people at the center are gonna somehow replace them, and that that should not be something that in any way is communicated that you're not welcome.

- A: Well—and—and if there's any hint that you're not welcome any time of day, you know, especially when your child is there, it's time to find new care.
- Q: Yes. Yes.
- A: It's time to, you know, just go.
- Q: If you're looking for quality care are there certain things that you would look for, Jerlean, in terms of how a person interacts with a child that would really be a clue to whether they would be, you know, the right person?
- A: Well, I think a person who exhibits patience, who is calm—calm, but animated, if that makes sense. I think excellent caregivers are curious people. You know? And, they ask questions. And they willingly answer questions. They seem to be people who are reading their environment, and—and both, uh, responding to it, but also anticipating. So, if you watch this kind of person, in—in, for example, a—a toddler classroom, it's gonna appear as though they have eyes in back of their head, because they're anticipating, and they just will in the course of talking to you quietly move over and—and move a table aside so that the traffic of kids, you know, speeding along with their little, uh, Tonka trucks or whatever, uh, aren't gonna smash into it—that kind of person.
- Q: Sure. Well, I think the other thing that you're talking about is some of the best childcare providers and early educators that I dealt with were—were people who helped me reframe some of the behavior my kids were exhibiting. I mean, I'll never forget, you know, talking to my daughter's teacher when she was three, and I said, "Well, you know, Mattie can sometimes be, umm, unbelievably obstinate. You know, has this bothered you in class? You know, will she think—you know, sometimes she—at—at home she just will, you know, dig her heels in." This teacher said, "Well, we really see Mattie as very persistent. She sticks to thing." You know, she—she's very able to concentrate. Everything I said she was able to put a positive spin on. And I just thought It really also helped me help Mattie, and—to see it as maybe a positive, that she really didn't like to be interrupted, 'cause she would get focused on something. She's still very focused on things. So, umm, I think that's—that's something that—that I learned when I did have someone who was really wonderful.
- Q: Let's just talk a little bit about some of—let's say some of the practical, umm, factors that a lot of parents do think about, the—this ratio of

childcare provider to child, the cleanliness, the safety. Umm, are these also important things that parents should be looking at?

- A: Why sure. A place should smell fresh and clean. You know, that's an indication that it probably is. And the staff/child ratio—what we're really talking about is a small-enough number of children for a caregiver to be able to give focused attention to each of the children in her care. And—and so that's really what that's about, that she can tend to the needs of—of each child, and—and help each to—to blossom to their full—full potential.
- Q: You hear a lot about this ratio of children to child care provider, you know how many kids is it considered either safe or really possible to watch when let's say we're talking about children under a year old.
- A: For infants, uh, one adult for three children, and for toddlers, it's more like one to five. But the group size matters. So twelve children and four adults, that's—that's probably too crowded cause it's—it could be a little chaotic. If there are 25 toddlers, that's too many. Uh, but, you know, fifteen is—is manageable.
- Q: And how about, you know, having a lot of, uh, toys there, uh, you know, a lot of books? You know, if you had to make the choice between a center that has tons of resources and equipment and one where, you know, the caregivers are more about this open, collaborative relationship, umm, I'm guessing you'd say the heck with the equipment and go with the one where they have an open, caring relationship.
- A: Well, the—the relationship is always paramount in my mind. But what I also know is that if you walk into a place that is clearly resource poor, and what I mean by that is if it's a room that's caring for children who are let's say eighteen months old, and you look at the shelves and there's only one of everything, that's a problem. That means this wonderful teacher now has disgruntled children, because they're gonna be fussing over the lack of equipment. Children need—need something to do. They need enough of it that several children can be using the equipment. They don't need so much that everybody—every single child in the room has one of everything, 'cause they do want them to share. But—so, there's a—there's a middle ground that's needed.
- Q: One of the things that Zero To Three found when we did this research with 1,600 parents was that certainly what's happened in the economy has had a terrible effect on parent's ability to find child care, to afford child care. This was a while ago now, but—you know, and things have unfortunately not gotten a lot better-- that one in four parents have had to make

adjustments to their childcare arrangements, and that about 20% of parent said that they just couldn't afford child care. So, you know, a lot of them had spouses who were taking over the duties due to losing a job a lot of them had to cut back on the number of hours they had their child in care. You know, I—I'm sure that we all know families, and we've been there ourselves, where we have to cobble together something using relatives. And, you know, what—what happens in a situation like that, particularly if let's say, you know, Aunt Tilda really doesn't necessarily want to be looking after your kids? How can parents handle that? Or is it just very important to be aware of that?

- A: I guess what I would want them to keep thinking about is as they make their choice, uh, is this a person who really wants to be with their child and finds joy in being with their child, because if they don't, then the day-to-day drudgery of it is going to send the child a message that a parent really wouldn't want the child to have, that kind of they're a burden and that kind of thing. So, you look for—for the relatives and friends and neighbors who enjoy being with children and see the work they're doing not so much as doing a favor for the parent, but rather it's about the child and—and kind of showing the world to the child. That's where you get the best kind of circumstance. Sometimes what people do too is they might have a family member on one day, a neighbor the next day and so things are really uneven and a little discombobulated. Well, the child experiences it that way, uh, in an uneven, uh, kind of way. And particularly for younger children, that's really problematic and hard for that child to kind of latch onto what is the routine going to be, what can I count on? And so that's difficult.
- Q: You hear about continuity of care, and in a center that—that the turnover rates unfortunately are often very high, but I'm guessing that that's something parents really should ask about just for that reason.
- A: When I was a childcare center director, uh, I can remember a number of parents saying, "How long has the infant staff been here," and, "When was the last time you had to hire somebody new," and those are all good questions to ask. But I think they also need to ask, umm, "Will my baby be assigned a primary caregiver," "Uh, will I know to whom I'm handing my child each day, that that's the person who will be tending to my child's needs, and, umm, you know, putting them down for a nap, and so on." It's not that others can't help, but there ought to be a primary person, uh, that the child and parents will know that that's the person they can go to, uh, to find out, uh, all they need to know about how the day has gone.

- Q: Right. Uh, you know, let's take a second, Jerlean, and just, umm, talk about why that is important even when a child is very young.
- A: What the child needs to know is that his actions are appreciated, are encouraged, and that he can count on somebody when he's uncomfortable and he know who that somebody is gonna be. And so when programs change rooms and caregivers on children as they progress physically, that is just the worst reason in the world to change a child's room or caregiver, because they're starting to crawl. No. Or started to walk? No. They need the consistency of care giving. That's—it's from that core—that attachment that the child really, uh, can soar. That—that connection is what allows them to soar and conquer the world.
- Q: That is a very important thing to—for parents to be aware of. I think one of the other challenges that a lot of parents have is that they don't have a lot of choice, or maybe they're finding someone who's pretty good, but they don't really know if they share their values, or if, you know, their way of caring for the child or disciplining the child would be consistent with what they would hope. Is there—is there a way that parents can address this without, offending someone, without coming on too strong? I know for a lot of moms it's—it's a very—this is a very tough dance to do.
- A: Mm-hmm [yes]. Mm-hmm [yes]. well, first of all, I think that if—if—if parents have some strong values around things like discipline and so forth, then that's one of the earliest conversations they ought to have, because you need to know whether the caregiver really sees kind of trial-and-error learning as okay and part of normal development, or if trial and error means if you don't do it right, uh, you've done something bad, and—and that's a fundamental kind of issue that parents need to know where the caregiver stands. Uh, additionally, what does a caregiver consider, uh, appropriate discipline-- and that needs to be talked about quite—quite early on. Let me give you an example if you'll entertain this a moment. This is of me as a young mother, umm, and, mind you, this is somebody who studied child development. But, you know, mothering and telling other people what to do about their children are two different things.
- Q: Yeah. Believe me; I know. Yes. Exactly.
- A: And as a young mother I used family child care. those are people who care for children in their homes . And for my two children when they were very, very young, that was the choice that I made to use family child care. There wasn't a lot of infant care out there, you know, 40 years ago. And, uh, so I chose a family childcare provider, and what I was looking for was

someone who was, umm, uh, I will say traditional in their viewpoints around child rearing. Traditional in the sense of, uh, African-American culture. I was way away from my family. You know, there were no grandmas, no nothing, but I wanted somebody who brought that both to my parenting and to my children.

And so I picked this caregiver, I really really liked Mattie, because she was just so down to earth and I felt steadier as a parent having her as a partner even that early on. I went to her house. And low and behold she has a huge German Shepherd—huge. This dog's name was Sheba. And Sheba was very protective of Mattie and her children. Okay? But the first time or two that I left my children—leaving them with her and Sheba in the house, I was just convinced she was gonna eat my kids up. I was just absolutely convinced of that. Uh, but I—but I shared it with her, and she laughed and she said, “Girl, you don't have to worry about Sheba. If you look at your child wrong she will bother you, but then she's not gonna bother your child.” And indeed Sheba didn't. You know, my kids—you know, they were hanging off of Sheba. They loved Sheba. And Mattie was a wonderful caregiver for my children. She helped me with potty training, which I was atrocious at, you know, in terms of helping them. But imagine if I had decided not to use her because of that darned dog. You know? And it was—we had to—we had to meet each other in the middle there somewhere.

Q: Sure. I think that's, you know, a wonderful example I think also because Sheba's a great metaphor for probably all sorts of things that—in terms of baggage as parents that we have, umm, you know, when—when we are meeting a caregiver. I think that, umm, you know, we all have those stories.

A: And that's why being able to go and visit at any time is so important. You know, one of the things that I always tell parents even before you choose, is go and visit. Without your child go and sit there for 45 minutes to an hour. Just watch what's going on. And I say that because even the best actress in the world in front of you in terms of how they relate to children cannot keep it up for as long as an hour They're gonna show you their real stuff.

Q: One of the hardest things for me, and I think for a lot of parents, and we talked a little bit about this, is when you do see things differently. Umm, you know, if you have a child who is a picky eater and you have a childcare provider who's kind of a—you know, believes in the clean plate club, that can be a tough thing for parent to know how to address if in fact

they don't want—you know, they don't want to pull the kid out of the childcare center because of this, but they know it's really be—becoming an issue. How—how would you approach someone about that?

A: I think, you know, then you—you sit down and you talk about quantity. You find compromise in talking about the quantity. So the—the deal may be that—that the caregiver agrees to put half as much of—as—as what they would normally put on the child's plate so the child has a chance to clean the plate, if you will, and ask for more if they wanted. Umm, so much can be in the quantity. Umm, I remember being at a parent meeting when I was a center director, and someone from the public health came and gave every parent, uh, some Playdough and said, "Make me a hamburger the size you make for your child." And they had a good conversation about what's an appropriate quantity for a child of—of X age. Uh, and it just brings it all into focus for people. So, you know, negotiating the quantity—put half as much, or a third as much, uh, and then—and then go from there.

Q: Oh, definitely you know, you can even say, "Look, I—I—you know, maybe I'm being crazy about this, but"—and—and—and give the caregiver an opportunity to see your side of things.

One of the things I did want to ask about, because I think there are lots of parents who have children who have special needs who maybe have a disability who need a special kind of care they have really a particular challenge in terms of partnering with a provider. Are—are there specific tips that you could give parents who are in this situation?

A: Well, I—actually I don't think I would change anything that I said in particular, because in—in my mind every child is really, really special, and whether it's a child with, uh, uh, a learning disability, or developmental delay, or a, you know, exceptionally shy, or overly boisterous—all of those kids have special needs and need a special kind of caregiver. And parents in the search for that special caregiver for their special child still have to ask questions, uh, observe, umm, uh, work toward that open two-way communication, uh, so that they can jointly, uh, give that child the very best opportunities. And, you know in the case of a child that maybe has some, uh, developmental delays, or learning disabilities, or whatever it might be, you need to know, as you do with—with anybody caring for any child, does this person really have a lot of patience. Bt then on the other hand you also want to know does this person believe in my child? If they—if—if you've got a caregiver who's written your child off, you don't have what you need.

Q: I—I think that, you know, part of what I'm hearing is that this is such a two-way street, that we also have to, umm, recognize that—that it may be really good for a child to experience people who, umm, are not necessarily what you thought would be the perfect candidate for a childcare provider, uh, but maybe—umm, you know, maybe—maybe surprise you in terms of both their—what they bring to the relationship, what they bring out in your child, umm, that may be very different than what you—you do.

A: And what they bring out in you.

Q: Jerlean, this has been terrific. I can't think you enough. So much wonderful information.

A: My pleasure.

Q: I really enjoyed it. Take care.

A: Okay. Take care.

Q: Bye now.

A: Bye-bye.