



Podcast 47: Inclusive Tips and Solutions for Early Educators with Ijumma Jordan and Dr. Isela Garcia

Episode notes: <http://prekteachandplay.com/podcast47>

Announcer: *Welcome to the Pre-K Teach & Play podcast, where solutionaries are reclaiming children's right to learn through play, reimagining inclusive classrooms, and revolutionizing early care and education. Here's your host, Dr. Kristie Pretti-Frontczak.*

Kristie: All right, hey everyone. This is a on-demand bonus session for the [2020 Summer Leadership Institute](#). And I have two amazing friends and colleagues with me today. I'm Kristie Pretti-Frontczak. And each of my colleagues will say hello, and then we're going to talk to you about what inclusion means to us, and in early childhood.

Ijumaa: Hello, my name is [Ijumaa Jordan](#). I'm an early childhood consultant, And right now my home base is North Hollywood, California.

Isela: I am [Dr. Isela Garcia](#), and also an early childhood consultant. I do a lot of work in the kindergarten through third grade realm, as well as the zero to five. And I am in Phoenix. Well, I'm kind of outside of Phoenix, Arizona, where it is very, very, very hot right now, by the way.

Kristie: Yeah, and I'm here in Ohio where it's not. It's actually beautiful. I keep telling y'all! The heart of it all! So we're gonna start off. And so our intention was to share with you our very best tip, but they're going to be really tips about what we think really can make inclusion work, and maybe barriers that we can remove for you as you all try to move the needle on inclusion for young children. And so we're going to start off with, what does inclusion mean to each of us, but we're gonna kind of build on each other's ideas. And so I made three notes about what it means to me. There's one that always comes to my mind, which is inclusion as a right, not a rite of passage. So that's my first way of thinking of it, that it's just a human right. The second one is, it always dates me, but it's from the TV show, "Cheers," when Norm would come into the bar, y'all know, I love beer, so that makes sense. And everyone would say--

Kristie/Ijumaa: Norm!

Kristie: Right? That for me is what inclusion feels like, is that sense of belonging. And then more practically, it's when we as adults create safe harbors, or safe spaces, or safe interactions for children, that we see them, that we soothe their nervous system, and that we have secure attachment. So I pull from attachment science for the four Ss from a practical way. So my mantra, or my champion out in the world kind of yell off the rooftops is that inclusion is a right, not a rite of passage. The way it feels to me is when everybody says "Norm!" And then from a practical way, I think about helping children feel safe, seen, soothed, and secure. All right? All right.

Ijumaa: Sounds great.

Kristie: We didn't plan who was going second, so.

Ijumaa: So I'm thinking about what you said, Kristie, about not only that being a right, that we start there, that we're not there to rescue children, that we're trying to be the saviors and think of children that usually need inclusive programming, like, "Oh, those poor kids." We have to see them as full and whole, and that it's their right to be there, and it's their right to have an education, and be in places where they are fully included. And that goes along with that sense of belonging, that that's key to, especially in early childhood, when you talk about secure attachment, that you have to feel like you belong, and not just, we have "Belonging" on the wall, or "We're all in this together," or, you know, those cute posters, those inspirational posters we have, that children have to feel it, that they have to feel like once they walk in the room, people are excited, and they know their name, and they call their name. And then thinking about how you want to support them, not only physically in those physical needs, but those emotional needs, and figuring out what that individual child needs, and also having them be part of a group. 'Cause sometimes I think when we talk about inclusion, a lot of times, we just talk about that individual child, but it needs to also talk about they're part of a group, that they're part of a community, and making sure that they have that, that they can actually be with each other, and not be isolated.

Isela: So yes, yes, I absolutely, and to build on that, I think then I tend to go right into the heart of who we are, as professionals. And I think that, and I, currently, I have several contracts working in classrooms, when we get back into classrooms, but in the last couple years that really serve children who are on IEPs, and so that looks different in each district. But the thing that I always go to is that we tend to look for, we tend to look through the lens of lack. Instead of looking at potential, probability, opportunity, we see what's wrong instead

of what's right. And conversations that I've had with teachers where they'll say, "Oh, they can't do that," or, "We can't put that out for these reasons," or the room is scarce, with very few things for children to do, because there's this perception that for whatever reason, they are unable to handle the materials, the space, the whatever. And we tend to just get in that space of looking through the lens of lack instead of opportunity. And so what I say over and over and over, and many people who are watching here today may already do this, but we have to get in touch with our beliefs about children, about what our heart is saying about them, because our head knows all the right answers, right? Our brain goes, "Oh, yes. "These are the goals that we have, "and we know what the IEP says, "and these are the things that we're doing to support, "blah, blah, blah." What does your heart say? What does your heart say about this particular child? And when you are in his presence, what is your heart saying about who he is, what he or she has to offer? You know, it's like, does your heart smile in the presence of this child? And so I think that we have to become very aware of our emotional state of being and our thoughts about each individual child.

Kristie: What I appreciate about that, Isela, is this idea that, we always say [mindset before methods](#), but that's, I don't know, even more foundational than mindset. It's like, just from human to human, this idea of, what do I think about you? What do I feel like about, what are my thoughts and feelings about you? And then Ijumaa, I want to think more about what you said, too, about that this child exists within a community, within a group, and how we always, we tend to think about the individual. And if we think about the group, it's about how the individual can be pushed into the group, or compliance so that they can fit into the group, versus what it means to be part of the group, which I kinda felt you were saying more of.

Ijumaa: Yeah, so... You can be in community, you can be in group where there's interaction and that there's reciprocity, that I give you give, and we figure out how to be together. So it shouldn't just be that we're just trying to push children into socializing, or push them into groups so, you know, they can make friends, and that's their goal, and we check it off. That the community has to be set up, that it's open and available for that belonging to happen, and allowing that process to unfold. And so children might be hesitant, 'cause it might be their first time, especially in early childhood, being in group care. If they don't come with siblings, or cousins, or other children around, like, "What is happening here? "People are moving around, and it's loud, "and there's these adults I don't really know." But then we're like, "Oh, let's put them with this person, "and let's get it all set up "so they can develop their social skills." But before we check off that box, we have to check in with

ourselves and make sure that the community is ready to welcome and make sure that belonging is the action that we're taking, that when we think about socialization, we're thinking about belonging, not just being in the group, like you said, but being a part of that group.

Kristie: And I think when you, this'll be, even when we think about more significant things, like expulsion and suspension, but even just lighter things, in terms of pull out, pull over, pull aside, you know, what are we saying to children about each other, and what does it feel like to miss out on certain things? So I think there's a lot of implications for all of that. But I think what Isela was saying about how you feel about this child is gonna have implications for how easily it is okay with you that they miss out, or that they are all the way to something like 'expelled'.

Isela: I think that to kinda go with what Ijuma was saying, there's an intentional decision that we have to, I think in our minds create that that sense of belonging, adults are the ones to model that experience. And the language that we use, what can we do to be most helpful right now? What might Jessie need right now, even, and depending where Jessie is developmentally, we might even ask that question. "What are the things that would be most helpful to you now?" So that we're mindful of being supportive of one another, or even saying it out loud, "I'm gonna take a couple deep breaths, "and I'm gonna sit here with Jessie "just for a few minutes" And you know, whatever is happening, just sort of sportscast that experience from a place of being respectful and honoring who he is, he or she is as an individual. And I think that sometimes, we do just think that kids are gonna magically know how to do this, or that we make an assumption because we're in a group, we are a community, It really takes an intentional decision on the teacher's part.

Kristie: So let's do this. Let's go ahead and now transition into our tips. And then if we, I won't have very many visual supports either, so just know that in addition to this recording, we'll put some links to things for people to read or to look at, and there'll be a transcript as well. So if it feels like a lot to hold into your head, just know that there's the transcript and some notes, as well. So my top tip is, I thought about this sense of this as a right, this as a feeling, and even just that it's this reciprocity between children and their caregivers and children and one another in community. My top tip is my other mantra, which is *what* before *how*. So I'm just gonna unpack it for a few minutes, and then let you guys jump on to it and say how that maybe relates to your tip, or press back and say that doesn't make sense, that sort of thing.

Kristie: So the reason I say *what* before *how* is I think that whenever we want to accomplish something, we get straight to, "Well, how do I do it?" I do this all the time with Ijumaa. When we're working on my work, I'm like, "Okay, I see a problem," or, "I see something I want to be different," even if it's not a problem. I'm like, "How do I fix it?" And she'll often invite me, "But what is it about it that's problematic?" Or, "What is it about it that you want "to see show up differently?" So in my own, taking my own medicine, the idea is that if you have a child with diverse abilities, and you do, and even if they come with an IEP, an individualized education plan, we too quickly say, "Oh, how will I help them have a sense of belonging? "How will I help there be a safe harbor? "How will I form a secure attachment?", when we're really not clear about what.

Kristie: So then, the slippery slope is that people go, "Well, if I need to unpack what, "I need to do assessment." So that's my second mantra, that assessment, instruction, and play should be synonyms. So when we assess children, we are playing alongside and with children. We're asking why and why now. We're not trying to go, "Oh, can you do this, or that?" We're not trying to, as Ijumaa said, check it off the box. But the assessment for me is really sitting beside you and getting to know you, and understand who you are, and to answer that question, why, and then why now? And if I have to keep asking why. But that's also instruction, so people go, "Well, that's gonna take a long time, Kristie. "When am I ever going to get to the how?"

Kristie: To me, they're all the same thing. Getting to know you, and to be with you, and to play with you is to assess and to intervene. And then when I think of groups of children, it's not so scary, because I take the same experience, the same interaction, activity, that's play, and I have different 'whats' that I'm teaching, versus going, "Okay, I have this activity, "and it doesn't fit for this kid, "so how do I change," the how, "how do I change it?" Instead, I plan it with lots of different 'whats' in mind. So that's kind of a big level. My one tip, or my go-to tip is what before how, and you get to the what by sitting beside, and then you design and engage in experiences and interactions that have multiple 'what's' in the same experience. All right, so thoughts, you guys, you all, you folks?

Isela: I agree.

Kristie: That's a yes!

Isela: And in my mind what I call that is to be the learner. And so for me, this is my, what makes this child an incredible human being? That's the lens that I look through. And so it's sitting,



being with the child, playing with the child, engaging and listening wholeheartedly, because, and being fully present. I mean, sometimes I see teachers sitting, but they're not fully present. They've got the to-do list running in their head. Or it's like, I don't know if you've ever had this experience where you go get your hair done, or your haircut and they're cutting your hair, but they're looking around, and they're engaging in conversation, but they're not fully present with you. It's the same type of experience. It's like when we're fully present, that's when we can truly see the child. And so it's in that engagement that we learn what they need, we learn about who they are, we learn about what they like to play and what they like to say when they're playing. And that becomes sort of the key to open up the possibility of what's next. If they're, you know, it gives me insight to what I need to do. And so I think we're saying the same thing, we just kinda say it a little bit differently, right?

Ijumaa: Yeah. And I was thinking, Kristie, when you're talking about assessment, instruction, and play, thinking about that relationship as curriculum, that those things, that relationship is part of all that we do with children, and that it's part of play, that it's part of instruction, it's a part of assessment. And so like Isela said, you have to be fully present for any and all of that to work. And so, on the individual teacher in the classroom with children, thinking about, how am I fully present with the children, and how am I, and not just play, I'm just gonna be stuck in those three things, just focused on assessment, or just focused on instruction, and just focused on play. All of those, play needs to live inside of all of that, and play has to be at the center in early childhood. So it's not, it shouldn't just be an afterthought. I don't see those things as linear, I see them as circular, that you're doing all three of them, sometimes simultaneously, sometimes you're moving in between, sometimes you're doing play and assessment, sometimes you're doing play and instruction, sometimes you're just doing play, and all of those things live inside of there. So I think it's important, especially in early childhood, that we remember that play should be at the center of all we do, and that will require us to be fully present, 'cause play only happens when that, when we can be that with children, and support children, and being present in their play.

Kristie: Yeah, and that's an important distinction, because when I say that assessment, instruction, and play are synonyms, that they mean the same thing, what I really need is they all mean play.

Isela: I think we also have to get into the habit, or at least the thought process, of doing with children as opposed to...to children. And especially in classrooms that I'm in, we are still in



that space, unfortunately, of doing to children. Especially, you know, we have IEPs, and we're gonna do "to them", because we have to meet these required hours, right? Instead of looking at play, and how are we doing with children? You know, how are we engaging with?

Kristie: And let's think about as we're talking, too... From a time perspective of when this was recorded, we may not be in classrooms, or we may be in classrooms in different configurations. And so if we think of the play partner, or the person who's doing with, it may be somebody that's doing partially virtually, it may be a family member or a caregiver, or it may be someone in the community who's not a teacher by training, but is doing some of that group care and education. So we'll keep that in mind too, so that we talk about any adult needs to be thinking about relationships, being present, being playful. So Ijumaa, do you want to go with your top tip? Was there a variation or a different direction?

Ijumaa: I think what I wrote down previously was making sure that, a lot of times, we talk about inclusion, we talk about diversity and equity, and not let those just be three words, that those aren't just words that we say, that diversity actually has inclusion in it, that diversity, that we come a variety of ways, variety of abilities, we have a variety of identities, and all of those should be present and welcomed into the classrooms, as adults, as children, and that we think about having an equity lens about the systems that are impacting. So that suspension, and the separation, and the disposability of children is part of a system that's not actually built for black children, indigenous children, and children of color, so we can't dismiss that. If we're going to talk about inclusion, we have to always have that diversity and equity lens, because... As part of our work around relationships, how we see children, how we engage with them, have very cultural, deep meanings, and we have to be aware of where we're coming from in order to be inclusive, and in order to have inclusive classrooms. So that was kinda my tip. And I think where it comes in is around that relationship and belonging, that we use that.

Kristie: I think something really key about what you said, too, is that we have a variety of identities. All too often, we may not attend to that children's identities are being formed in these early years, their sense of identity, but that all of those different intersects of their class, their language, their SES, their ability, their gender, all of that's already at play. And so as early educators, keeping that in the forefront, not just about what's on their IEP, but how all of that comes together is what I'm kinda hoping to say there. Isela, what does that all, how does that strike you?

Isela: I think it, I think we also have to be inclusive of families. I think we need to be willing to engage families, and that looks different in different places, and in different circumstances. You know, most of my experience has been with working with families in severe crises. And so, sometimes, that means making a connection at the very level that they can connect. Sometimes there's so many things going on in their world, it's difficult to, it's like, we have this perception of, you know, "You care about your child, "you should be doing these, these, this, "all of these things, "you know, coming and volunteer." I'm a parent, I'm in early childhood, and I don't volunteer at my child's school! I'm like, "Don't call me! "I'll send whatever you need, but don't call me." And there are reasons behind that that are more about, I know too much. I'd sit there and go, "What are you doing? "Why are you doing that?" But I remember some of my family members, that they just couldn't connect at the level that we, it's like this perception of what it looks like to be, to love your child, sometimes we perceive that. We'll, go, "Oh, she must not really care about him, "because she's not volunteering, "or coming to whatever field trip, "or every time I call, she's not responsive." It's like we don't allow and respect where families are coming from, we just make assumptions, and we fill in blanks based on our own values, and beliefs, and biases. We have to even approach them from a very openhearted perspective, and just be willing to have conversations about their children, about who they are about, you know, some of whether, you know, good things, birthday parties, whatever it is, but be willing to connect with families at that level, as well.

Ijumaa: 'Cause I think we hold a very narrow view, and it's typically a white middle class view, that there's an assumption that there's a parent at home, and so that parent has time to volunteer, come to daytime meetings, answer the phone when you call, reply to emails quickly, that they can take off of work to go on field trips. So all of those, we have to remember that those are, those expectations are based in white dominant culture, and that they haven't changed, because we haven't actually demanded that they change. And so we might not be able to impact it systematically at first, but we can make those choices in our classrooms as teachers.

Ijumaa: And like you said, meet them where they are, and so instead of assuming, "Oh, we're gonna have this parent, "this parent meeting during this week." Like, asking parents, "Hey, when are you available? "Would it be best to call you? "Do you want to, can you meet "with me five minutes at pick up? "Can grandma come? "Can, you know, uncle come? "Is someone available to come to talk to me?" Thinking about what's gonna make it work for that family, and allowing time for a variety of things. 'Cause just having daytime meetings



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during one week, and that's teacher conferences, you're eliminating so many families from being able to participate fully, and then you judge them, and talk about how they don't care and love their kids.

Isela: My child's school, in the actual booklet that they give you at the beginning of the year says, has something, her old school said something like, "One parent should stay home with the child "while the other," I was like.

Ijumaa: Whoa, whoa!

Isela: I couldn't believe it! I was like, "Is this really happening here?" I couldn't believe that that was actually written in there. I know, right? Yeah. So you, know, we make a, it's that very narrow scope. And I think that it happens in the classroom, we make assumptions, you know, children who have IEPs, IEP meetings, all the dialogue that needs to happen in order to create that cohesive IEP that, you know, we're all on the same page. It's like we make so many assumptions, and we, and because we are in the field of early childhood, we just have assumed that that's the right thing to do without questioning, without questioning the systems.

Kristie: Well it's important, then, as we take away this part about families, I think all of us can agree that during the very first onset of the pandemic, people were like, "Oh, "maybe we don't have good relationships with our families. "Maybe, oh! "What's going on over there?" And I hope one of our lessons is that we go, "Okay, "a one size won't fit all of our students, "not just our students with diverse abilities, "all of our students." And we need to ask families, "What do you want? "What would work for your family?" And the more we keep trying to say, you know, that families just have internet and that, well, now it's solved, that now we're equitable. I mean... I would lose my mind if I had a toddler right now, or four-year-old that you wanted me to work on their IEP goals. I would lose my mind, for so many reasons.

Kristie: So I feel like we really need to think about what's important right now. I think the question is what before how, back to that. What should we be working on right now during the pandemic? Not how many hours of specially-designed instruction, and who's gonna deliver it, and how are we gonna deliver it, right? That's all back to how. But let's really think about what is the most meaningful thing we can do with our learners right now, whether you're on an IEP or not, then start to ask each other, if that's equally important to

us, families, school, the community, then we can start thinking about how to pull that off, but it can't be everybody gets the same thing.

Ijumaa: Right, you can't, it's not gonna solve the problem to giving everybody a laptop, or an iPad.

Kristie: And then, and I respect--

Ijumaa: Problem solved!

Kristie: And I appreciate all the teachers who were creative, and did all kinds of amazing things, but to think that a certain time of day is gonna work for all families to jump on Zoom. And if they're like me, every day's a little bit different. So even if you go, "Well now this is our routine," every day is different.

Ijumaa: And we're still trying to adjust to it.

Kristie: Right.

Ijumaa: Right? That's actually the new normal, that it's not the same every day. Every day is changed. Change is constant. That's it, that's what we got. And so how do we educate and care for ourselves and each other, knowing that? So being, knowing that the old system just isn't going to work, and so we have to create new systems. We have create new ways of supporting ourselves, and having different asks.

Ijumaa: And do you feel that-- Sorry, Ijumaa. Was that your top tip, was about families?

Isela: No.

Ijumaa: Isela. What else did you have?

Isela: You asked me what I thought about what Ijumaa said!

Kristie: I did! I just wanted to make sure! Okay, so what's your top tip!

Isela: Okay, so I think I covered a couple of them already, but my top tip is to become completely openhearted. And I won't go through all of the parts to that, but I think one of the most important parts of being openhearted is that we have to believe in children from

our heart space, not from our head space. And so what I mean by that is that I think as teachers, we get in our head, you know, here are the goals that we need to provide, or, we need to meet, this is the what and the how, we do all of that, right? But we stay in the head space instead of the heart space. And what I mean by the heart space is that we extend love through our actions and interactions. And when we believe in children at that heart level, we give them permission to believe in themselves.

Isela: I had a little boy, I'm gonna tell you the story about Timmy. He was, this was 25 years ago, 27 years ago, at least 27 years ago. So he's a grown man now, but he had, well, he has, I'm assuming, he has autism. And it was during a time where we didn't know a whole lot about anything, right? And I was the teacher that kids got kicked out of their schools, and they came to me. So in my classrooms, I had 13 boys and two girls and, and 14 and 15 boys. And so he was, his mom came to our school, and he wasn't kicked out. He was getting services, but she was very, very unhappy. So she came to me going, "Well, he doesn't talk yet." He was four. "He doesn't talk yet," and I said, "Okay." And she goes, "And he gets, "he has a really hard time with transitions." I said, "Okay." And so she kept naming all the things to kinda scare me, And I was like, "Oh, okay," you know? And she's like "Really?" And I was like, "Yeah, okay, we'll figure it out!" I didn't know well enough to say, because you know, we didn't know anything. I didn't think about, you know, what's on the IEP, and what are the hours, or anything, I was like, "Okay, Timmy, come on in!"

Isela: And so he became a part of, and you know, he didn't verbally communicate with us, so I taught him some sign, I watched his eyes, I would say to him, "I see you looking over here, "I'm wondering if that's what you want." And so I just kept talking to him, and treated him like everybody else! We were just, you know, a part of this community together. After snack time, one afternoon, after nap time, when kids would finish eating, they would go outside. They would just go on their own, go outside with, there was a ready teacher outside. Every day, Timmy and I would just hang out. He kinda took his time eating, and we just talked. We just talked, and, well, I talked to him, right? And he just kinda nodded and looked at me. And one day, we had finished the snack, and I stood up and I went to get some more crackers off the shelf, And I sat back, no, I was up there and he says, I hear this little boy say, "Isela, can I have more crackers please?" And I turned around and I was like, "Who the hell said that?"

Ijumaa: Who said that? Who's here?

Ijumaa: I was like, "Is there a child under the table?" And he, I remember his big blue eyes, and he smiled at me, and we had been, you know, he did some sign, he said, "More crackers, Isela?" And I was like, "You can have all the crackers you want!" And it was, my interactions and actions came from that heart space of knowing about him. And I never thought for one moment that there were any limitations. I never thought, "Well, he can't talk." I would say, "Well sure, yes, of course he can." And you know, he doesn't know how to communicate. "Oh yeah, of course, "we'll figure out a way that I can, you know, "I can help him figure out how to do that." But it all came from that space of knowing him, paying close attention to him, figuring out how to go into his world instead of me trying to yank him into our world.

Ijumaa: And so all of that, it was just, he taught me, again, that's where my "become the learner" comes from, he taught me to listen with my heart, more than, and early in my career. And so it was Timmy who taught me that in any given situation with any child, I have to listen with my heart, which means that I have to put aside my judgment. And what I think all the should haves, and all the things that I think need to happen need to be set aside until I know who he is, who he's saying to me he needs.

Kristie: Just anything that can offer, 'cause in a moment here, we're gonna, I want to build on that, but I want to segue it, too. We're gonna talk about how can we remove barriers for those who are engaged in this learning with us today to do these things. So Ijumaa, as you listened to Isela, I know you can hear a bunch of teachers and educators say, "Yeah, but, "my director, my principal, my coach, "my district requires, I have to do." Kind of, what came up for you as you listened to Isela, but also, what can we offer people that, immediately, and Isela, you can jump in too, are gonna be, "Yeah, but. "I want to work from a place of my heart, "but I have all these district rules."

Ijumaa: We all have rules, right? And I think about what did Isela say, teaching from your heart? That's free, nobody has to come in and give you permission to do something. And it doesn't have to be a big thing. If you just pay attention and say yes. If you just pay attention and say, "Okay, "here's this child before me," and just say yes to who they are. So you can just start there and see what happens, and that doesn't need district rules, or your director's permission, or your co-teachers permission. You can start there. So if you could just start taking that small step and saying yes, and that yes comes from your heart, you can figure out what to do next. 'Cause once you open yourself up, once you open your heart, children respond to that, and go from that space.

Ijumaa: And, people feel overwhelmed by all the regulations, and the rules, and how people interpret that, and that's why also, you should be in community, that you go talk to someone to help you figure it out, that you're not alone, and not try to figure things out by yourself. That being in community and talking to other people, and talking to other educators about, maybe they don't know exactly what to do about your particular situation, but just sometimes having someone to listen to you, someone to help you figure out, "Oh, maybe I need "to figure out how to take a break," because it might be very intense if you have children that you don't know exactly what to do with, and you're new to opening your heart and saying yes, in a world that says no to so many things.

Kristie: I'm so glad, I was setting you up, but I was hoping you would take the bait, because you were talking about that the other day, that we all too often, especially those of us who are white, and who have just embraced this idea that, I have to have the answer, or I have to figure it out on my own, or there's something wrong with me. And I applied it in my own life, Ijumaa, I haven't shared this with you yet, but my brother-in-law has a lot of significant health needs, and he needs to go to the Mayo Clinic, but they can't go to Arizona because of COVID, all of the beds are full. So they needed to come to Minnesota, but they live in Idaho.

Kristie: And so each person in my family, I could see them each independently trying to figure this puzzle out. They were each going, "I have to be the fixer, "or the savior," or whatever just that was. "I gotta, the responsibility falls on me." So I said to my family, "Can we come together and brainstorm together? "And each of us will have an idea, "or each of us might have a burden that we can take, "not the whole thing, just pick up your part of it "But everybody picks up a part until we have a solution." A big aside, but that's when I was listening to you talk the other day to some early childhood educators, was that idea of, get your co-conspirators, or your allies, or just your friends, get people talking about this. And I appreciated the layer you just said now about having a break from it, understanding that this is hard, or big. So, that was about eight things. Isela, do you want to kinda piggyback on that as well?

Isela: I think, I'm not sure if I'm piggybacking on that, but.

Kristie: Okay. Go wherever your heart goes!

Isela: Let me just switch to what part can I do? What part of this can I do? And again, even with children, I, 'cause I get this a lot, a lot, a lot, 'cause I go into classrooms where children



have an IEP, and then we have some extreme behavioral concerns. And so a child who's three is throwing stuff across the room, bringing the teacher down by their hair, to the ground. And so I come from that place of, first off, what is he saying, or she saying that she needs, right? Well, the language I use is, what is he telling us right now? What is he telling us right now? And then flip the switch, instead of, "Well, he can't," or, "She can't," and dah dah dah dah dah, we flip the switch and go, "Oh, well she's still learning how to. "She's still learning how to," right? And so when we come from that lens of just correcting ourselves in our minds, constantly just reframing our thought process. "She's still learning how to," what might be next? I can see the possibility there, look at, and what you pay attention to, you get more of. So if you pay attention to all of the stuff that's not going right, you're gonna get more of that. If you pay attention to the potential, and possibilities, and community, and connection, and all those things, like magic, you're gonna see that.

Kristie: We have this phrase that, 'cause I like the reframe. So we always talk about when there's a problem, or a concern, or a yeah, but, you name it to tame it, which is what neurosciences say, but then you reframe it. And I think too often, especially in the binary, we either name it and then we try to reframe it, so we go, "Oh, I got this problem, let's fix it." And what we don't do is spend time in the messy middle taming it, and asking that question about what is this telling me, or how am I feeling about this, or why now? We don't spend any of that time, we just name it and try to reframe it, and then we're like, "That didn't work. "See, I knew that!"

Ijumaa: Right. And I think a lot of times, admitting that we're human and we're vulnerable, because a lot of times, when children have what people call extreme behaviors, teachers are scared, and don't want to be physically hurt, and sometimes that's the place that paralyzes them. And so again, being in community and knowing how to take care of yourself, and taking a break is going to be important. And a lot of times, children can sense that. If they feel like you're scared and out of control, then they're gonna be scared and out of control! And then somebody needs to hold it together when those things happen. And yeah, and so you just keep paying attention to that, and it keeps happening, and everyone is sad and frustrated. And so yeah, it does take, one of those skills is to learn how to be present. And part of being present is actually being in control of yourself, it's being mindful, it's watching your thoughts and, "What am I thinking now, what's happening now?" And that can be a practice that can actually help you when extreme things happen. And I'm sure all of you might have had experiences where the unexpected happens. I've had fires just break out of my classrooms. I've been on the phone with

directors that a man drove into a wall of a classroom. Things happen that are out of your control, but you have to be that person that keeps the control of yourself, and that, yes, you feel scared, but you have to, "I'm the adult, "I'm the person, no one else is coming! "So what do I do in that moment?"

Isela: I call that being the pillar of strength. And it was true when I was a classroom teacher, and it was true when I was an administrator. And how that makes sense in my mind is, I have to be the strength, I have to be the love, I have to be... I have to be the courage, I have to be those things in that moment. But at the same time, you know, there are moments, it's like, after the wall, somebody drives through your wall, you gotta act, right? At the end of that moment when that adrenaline starts to kinda come down a little bit, and I think that happens in life, because run, go, go, go, go, go, that have to take time before we get to that place. And I think it goes to what you were saying, Kristie, about there's this self expectation that we are perfect, that we are performing at this level that, I mean, who can maintain that, right?

Ijumaa: No one can.

Kristie: No one talks about, they're juggling, they're keeping the ball, you know, that game you play, keep the ball off the ground. The teachers will describe it to me that that's how they feel, that they have to keep all of them up. And if that's your expectation, it's gonna be a sad day. So Isela, you said a couple of important things there, let's go back to it. When we think about just the natural state of our bodies, we have to restore. So we can have that reaction, we can take action, but then we can't just stay at that level. It's not okay, so let's put a pin in that and come back to that about restore, guys. I think that'll be maybe how we close things up. The other is, I want people to notice that all the words you guys are describing is, they're actionable.

Kristie: So even, Ijumaa, when you said be present, you were still aware of things, asking things, critically examining things, not just, I'm just sitting there going, "Om. "Things are going on, but I'm amazing." You're still very engaged. That's not flipped your lid. And then all of the words you used, Isela, were like, be courageous, but you didn't say be the fixer, or the savior, or the person who's right. So I feel like people have, and myself included, have a little bit of trouble between take action, and be the support, and be the pillar, and be the key, but also, it's not all about you, and you don't have to be a perfectionist, you don't have to fix it. Those almost sound all the same. So, let's kinda close out this session for

people, kind of unpacking how that is a paradox, that we're asking you to take action, but not save, and then how we can prioritize restoring ourselves.

Isela: Who's gonna go first?

Kristie: I'm good.

Ijumaa: Paper, rock, scissors! Well, maybe it's me. So I'm thinking that how we don't get stuck, and that we don't play the binary, that it's not one thing or the other. We can be brave, we can act brave and still feel scared, and still feel that fear. So those, so that is possible. We're mindful of ourselves, but we're still taking action, we're fully present, but we're still taking action, we're still engaging. So it's not one thing or the other, those things happen simultaneously. And then that leads us to, those are very high energy, high emotional energy, high physical energy. And so when we get to those places, when those things happen, part of being mindful is moving into the restorative, and that's why we're, part of the reason why we're in community, 'cause community can help us rest, community can keep us safe.

Ijumaa: And so thinking about how do we, not moving, not just getting stuck in a binary, 'cause if you can't see the possibilities, as Isela said, then you're gonna feel stuck, and nothing is really gonna happen. But if we can think about what are the multiple possibilities that can happen, and I can just try one, and, you know, I do it, and then I sit back, and I rest, and I take a break, and I don't have to keep, I can find a basket. Community can be a basket, and you can put all those balls in it. You know, when you're ready to pick one or two of them up, you go do that, but you have to put them down.

Isela: Oh, is it my turn? Okay.

Ijumaa: I think so.

Isela: You can pass the baton!

Ijumaa: I'm done!

Isela: So your question, Kristie, was about not being the fixer, the one to do it. And I think it's easy to kinda fall into that, just because when you're in a leadership position, whether it's an administrative role or in the classroom, your job is to, in your mind, especially because



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we come from that, is to make it all work, fix it, make sure that everything is going well. And an early lesson that I learned, 'cause I was an administrator for a while, and an early lesson was that it's not about you. That was an early lesson I learned. My goal, the third time I became a director was that, even in our organizational chart, you know, that very hierarchical sort of organizational chart, mine was circular, and I was at the bottom. And one of the things that I finally figured out was that my job was to lead until I can follow. And so it was really this reciprocity in the relationship of, I don't have all the answers, but I, and I want us to come together to kind of figure out who we are as a program, as a unit, as an us.

Isela: And one of the ways that we represented that is, we had a tray full of tea lights, those little candle tea lights, and before every staff meeting, we would, one would light, someone would light theirs, and we would light our tea lights with other, the others that were already lit. And you know, tea lights burn out after a couple times, a couple uses, they burn out, and the idea, the symbolism behind it was that when we burn out, we still have a hue, that we are all lit here together. And before every meeting, we would start that way, because I wanted everyone to understand that we are all gonna have moments where we just feel, whether it's personal or professional, or both, where we're gonna dip, we're gonna dip emotionally, physically, we're going to become exhausted, and that we are here. When you can truly build a community, we are here to support one another through all of those times. And so I think it's important to be mindful of that it's an us, not a me. And when you can come from the us, not a me, then we become more willing to not be the one, the savior, the one that we self-impose, that we need to fix it.

Kristie: So this is what I'll do to close this out. I'm gonna list a few things that leaders, and administrators, and directors can do to remove barriers, to promote inclusion in early childhood. And I'm just gonna kinda say them, we're just gonna let them kinda sift through, and then each of you can just give your last kind of advice. And Isela, you could even just come back to that and say it again so we hear it, so we hear it, and so you hear it. So one thing, too, how could early educators actually get to inclusion? What barriers can we remove? Cause I feel like sometimes, we're always like, "Do more," but we haven't stopped doing something to make room, or we haven't removed a barrier to allow us, we just keep trying. So my first one was that we have to stop rushing and pushing.

Kristie: You could take that a lot of different ways, but mine was really about rushing and pushing early development. Always ask why over judging it or shoulding it. Connect first before taking an action or giving an answer. Create a match whenever possible, so that your, that

reciprocity that you're at and with. And then my last one was to imitate before ask. And I just think that's a funny one, but it just makes me laugh. We do it with children, but I see the parallel with adults all the time. So imitate before I ask a question. So if I'm assessing a child, I'm like, "What color is that?", and, "Do you know this?", and, "Do you like that?", and, "What'd you do yesterday?", blah, blah, blah. If I imitate either an emotion, or what you're looking at, or what you're doing, or what you're engaged in, or what's important, our mirror neurons automatically go, "You see me." So that was the imitate before you ask. So, closing barriers that you would suggest leaders remove, things that they can stop doing, or one thing they start doing. Ijumaa, go.

Ijumaa: I think letting go of the high of being the fixer. 'Cause I think we're not always honest of the thrill and the high we get when we are the fixer, when we are the problem solver, and start moving that to feeling the joy around watching other people solve the problems, especially when you're thinking about it as a director or an administrator, that your role as the leader is and support other people to fix the problems, 'cause it doesn't always have to be you. And if you're moving from me to us, allowing people, the us, to solve the problems, like you said about your family actually strengthened your group, strengthened your family, 'cause everyone is participating, and everyone gets that thrill, gets that high.

Kristie: That's good. Isela?

Isela: I think that we have to, I'm going to go back to my thing, who are we in the presence of one another? Really, truly, I think that so often, we can agree on these big ideas about having a responsive community, about being inclusive of one another. But dang it, if your actions don't show it, if you're talking mess about each other, if you're not being truly inclusive, you know, it's like, what do you want to see happen as a classroom community? That needs to be happening at a programmatic level. And if you're not doing that, you need to, especially as a leader, if you have your favorites, if you have identified which teachers are better than others, it's like you don't even have to say it. People know, they can sense it. So you have to really, as an administrator, check yourself, and make sure when you show up, you're showing up exactly the way that you want teachers to be in the classroom with children: fully present, openhearted, willing to connect. And stop, no one needs your judgment. And so that, those parts right there, we get in the way sometimes, because we come in with our own judgements and expectations, as opposed to really just allowing and seeking first to understand.

Kristie: And I think that, sometimes, that as an administrator, we have our own shark music. What will other administrators think? Will somebody get harmed? Will somebody go to the union? So it comes back to all of those things where I need to understand why I'm getting anxious about this, or I need to understand why I'm favoring this over here. Is it the high? Is it the appreciation versus, and just becoming aware of that shark music, yeah. All right, fabulous. Can't thank you both nearly enough.

Kristie: Thank you. A few quick things as we wrap up this episode. First, a note of gratitude to my guests, for their wisdom, generosity, and willingness to support the early care and education revolution so deeply. Second, do you know about my ECE Solution Membership program? It's a special membership library chock full of hundreds of searchable resources and tools that you can have in hand, at the click of a button. Visit prekteachandplay.com/ECE-membership to learn more and become a member today.

Kristie: Lastly, if you were inspired by this episode, if something affirmed your beliefs, or perhaps you discovered a practical tool, you can put into practice to help all children thrive in school and in life. Then I invite you to share the episode on whatever app you're using. Share with someone you feel would benefit or someone who would be inspired by today's conversation. Someone who will make a difference for them. Then be sure to subscribe so you can stay connected. With so much gratitude for all that you do, fellow revolutionaries, until next time.

Announcer: *Be sure to visit prekteachandplay.com for more resources, tips, and tools for early educators.*

