OTAC 2026 · ANNUAL CONFERENCE & INNOVATION EXPO

OT in the Wild

Toddlers Before the Referral

Jen Godin, MSOT, OTR/L

Bright Sparks Play Lab

OT-Informed community science for young children and caregivers

Find a seat, Lab Assistant. Leave the bins closed for now.



BEFORE WE START

Disclosures

Financial

Founder of Bright Sparks Play Lab. The programs, photos, and examples in this session come from Bright Sparks.

Nonfinancial

Research partnership with San José State University on the Bright Sparks study (PI: Winifred Schultz-Krohn, PhD, OTR/L, BCP, FAOTA).

Not therapy

Bright Sparks is a community OT-informed STEAM Play Lab. It isn't occupational therapy and isn't billed as OT services.

STEAM: science, technology, engineering, art, and math.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Analyze the impact of environmental design and storytelling on toddler engagement and participation in sensory-rich activities
2. Evaluate personal responses and clinical reasoning through experiential “Live Lab” simulations to differentiate between sensory input and meaningful occupation
3. Apply a caregiver coaching framework (Notice → Invite → Join) to support participation and facilitate carryover across clinical, school, and community settings

WHY THIS SESSION

OT can happen in the wild.

Skilled OT doesn’t always happen after a crisis or breakdown. In the community, it can look like:

- **Seeing “at risk” toddlers before the referral hits**
- **Free or low-cost community groups**
- **Parent coaching in the moment**
- **Adapting tools and environmental regulation**
- **Utilization of toddler chaos for development**



WHY BEFORE THE REFERRAL

So we go where families already are.

It shows up early

Poverty can show up in motor development by six months.

Fioroni Ribeiro da Silva et al., 2025 · 88 infants, Brazil

Community programs notice

Community programs are often where low-income children first get noticed.

Rossin-Slater, Sabety, & Wu, 2026 · public preschool, Medicaid data, 32 states

Early help goes further

Early intervention's benefits were largest for lower-income families.

Stingone et al., 2026 · 214,370 NYC children

Free or low cost. In the community. With partners who are already there.

First 5 · San José Public Library · Magical Bridge Foundation · Sunday Friends Foundation

Alongside timely evaluation and referral. Not instead of it.



Tell us about a time a toddler improved your treatment plan without consulting you.

Did they use outside-of-the-box thinking to invent a novel way to play or do something?

OUR GUIDING QUESTION

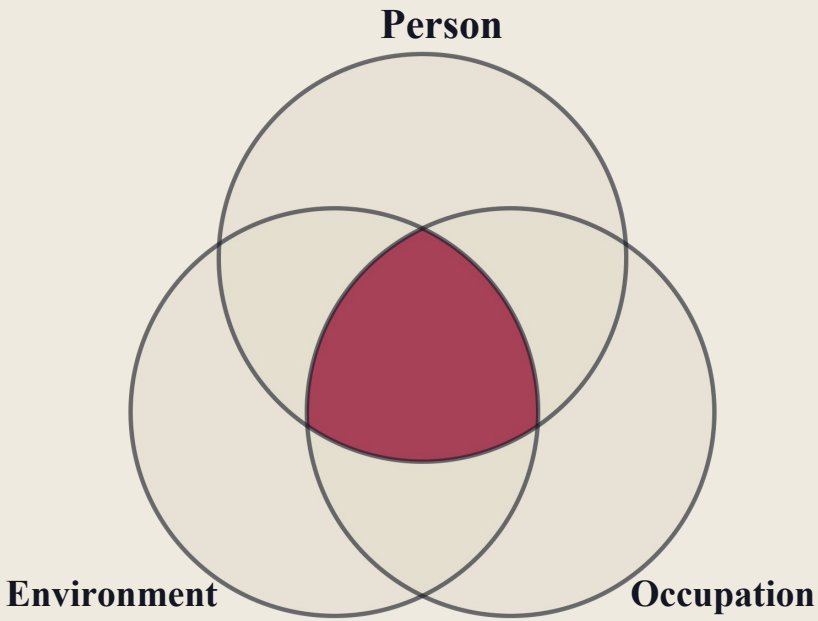
What has to be true for a child to get curious, engage in play, and build on it?

Before we change the child, we look at the conditions.

A related idea, attendance and involvement in participation: Imms et al., 2017

OUR LENS · PEO

Where these overlap



Person

The child, the caregiver, and the relationship between them.

Environment

The space, the materials, the setup. Even the words.

Occupation

Play! (of course)

Person-Environment-Occupation Model: Law et al., 1996 · applied here to the child, the caregiver, and their relationship

LIVE LAB 1 · ENVIRONMENT

Finding a way in

A sensory bin full of mystery. Rainbo[illegible]rice. Treasures buried out of sight. The onl[illegible] instruction: explore.

What has to be true about a space in order for play to be accessible to ALL children in the community?





GROUPS OF 2–3

Pick a door

A STORY

When did a child's capacity, curiosity, or determination take you by surprise?

A DIFFERENT SIDE

When did you help a caregiver see a different side of their child? What got the child there?

4–5 minutes · Answer either, or just listen

LAB 1 · DEBRIEF

What made this meaningful play for you?

Sensory input or meaningful occupation? Look at what it's doing for this child.

Hands
What did your hands do first?

Cues
What told you where to start?

Choices
Digging, watching, leaving.

What counted?

4 vs. 16

Toddlers (18–30 months) played longer, and in more varied ways, with 4 toys than with 16.

YOUR CALL **What would you change about this setup, and what would you leave alone?**

Dauch et al., 2018 (n = 36 toddlers) · Participation framework: Imms et al., 2017

LAB 1 · CAREGIVER WITH CHILD

Notice → Invite → Join

Bright Sparks Play Lab · a research-informed teaching framework

Notice

What is the child drawn to?

Invite

The invitation lives in the space. Said out loud only if it’s a story.

Join

Follow their lead. Keep it theirs.

> **Before we change anything, we watch. We wait. We sit on our hands. We put our finger on our mouth. And we listen.**

A teaching frame informed by joint-attention research: Suarez-Rivera et al., 2019

ENVIRONMENT · CAREGIVER WITH CHILD

Notice → Invite → Join

Bright Sparks Play Lab · a research-informed teaching framework

Notice

What is the child drawn to?

Invite

This can be a few interactive objects around the child or a story.

Join

Follow their lead. Keep it theirs.

> **An invitation can be taken, built upon, altered beyond recognition, or completely ignored.**

A teaching frame informed by joint-attention research: Suarez-Rivera et al., 2019

INVITE · IN THE WILD

Change the setup.

What do we do when we notice toddlers crowding the sensory bins? They aren't investigating or exploring other stations?

We know toddlers are pack animals.

Redirecting them out of the bins backfired. So we changed the room, not the child.

> **The obstacle course became an escape from lava.**

Godin, 2026, OT Practice



INVITE · IN THE WILD, AGAIN

Make room for throwing.

Kids who want to throw get a place to throw, and encouragement when they follow through.

> **“You helped all the balls go to the Basket Party!! Now they’re with their friends. You’re a great helper.”**



LIVE LAB 2 · PERSON

Following their lead

Same rice, reset: a shallow bin, a few things in view, a barn or a zoo that hints at a story.

Triads: child, caregiver, therapist.

What has to be true for a grown-up to join a child’s play and keep it theirs?





Pick a door

A STORY

Think of a moment when play helped a child and caregiver find joy together, or grow closer.

A STRATEGY

What’s your move for joining without taking over? Steal-worthy ideas welcome.

LAB 2 · CAREGIVER WITH CHILD

Notice → Invite → Join

Bright Sparks Play Lab · a research-informed teaching framework

Notice

What is the child drawn to?

Invite

The invitation lives in the space. Said out loud only if it’s a story.

Join

Follow their lead. Keep it theirs.

> **“I’ll join you in making grapes.” Even if it means not using anything I set up.**

A teaching frame, not a validated intervention · Informed by joint-attention research: Suarez-Rivera et al., 2019

LAB 2 · THERAPIST WITH CAREGIVER

Coaching the grown-up

1
Ask what matters to them

2
Observe together

3
Support their own try

4
Reflect together

> **The therapist coaches. The caregiver does the joining.**

YOUR CALL **What would you coach the grown-up to do, and what would you stop doing yourself?**

Coaching elements: Ward et al., 2020 · Coaching in early intervention: Seruya et al., 2022

LAB 2 · WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Joining helps. And it can be coached.

When grown-ups share the focus

Infants' longer looks at a toy went with a parent sharing their focus.

Suarez-Rivera et al., 2019 · observational, infants

Caregivers can learn it

Across 102 trials, programs focused on responsive caregiving did more for children's cognitive development. Coached mothers became more responsive.

Jeong et al., 2021 · meta-analysis, ages 0–3 · Landry et al., 2006

Coaching, not just telling

Coaching beat other ways of teaching caregivers, on caregiver outcomes. Evidence on child outcomes is still developing.

Sone et al., 2021 · meta-analysis · Seruya et al., 2022

> **What we mean by coaching:** planning together, observing, practicing, reflecting, and giving feedback, with the caregiver doing the doing.

Coaching practices: Ward et al., 2020

THE DECISION BEHIND THE PHOTO · 2

Coach the caregiver.

At public events, a parent often turns to me or a station leader: “Ask her how this works.”

I hand it back: there are many right ways to play.



OUR WELCOME SIGN

We don’t have to teach our children how to play. They’re already experts.

BEHIND THE LAB · WHAT WE SAY

Using "mantras" for coaching

Short and repeatable, so the whole community remembers them.

“You’re the Lab Assistant now. Congratulations.”
AT CHECK-IN, TO THE GROWN-UP: A ROLE FIRST

“What’s your hypothesis?”
AN INVITATION TO PREDICT

“There is no right way to play.”
PERMISSION

“We don’t eat the science.”
SAFETY DESIGNED IN, NOT POLICED

> **Two hard rules: we respect bodies. We respect materials.**



LIVE LAB 3 · OCCUPATION

The feather who wants to fly

“This feather wants to fly. Can we help it?”

Hand-crank fans, feathers, scarves.

What makes a child want to keep trying?



GROUPS OF 2–3

Think of a child who persisted despite discomfort or failure.

What helped the challenge feel worth it to the child?

4–5 minutes · Tell a story, build on one, or just listen

LAB 3 · DEBRIEF

Help that keeps it theirs.

What did your supporter do? What did the story change for you?

YOUR CALL **Help, or wait? How would you know it helped?**

Effort is contagious

15-month-olds tried harder after watching an adult work hard and succeed.

Leonard et al., 2017 · 15-month-olds

Taking over has a cost

When an adult took over, 4- and 5-year-olds persisted less afterward.

Leonard et al., 2021 · ages 4–5

Teach science as a story

Preschoolers explained science more clearly when it was part of the story's problem and solution.

Plummer & Cho, 2024 · ages 3–5

> **"You kept trying! Just like a scientist."**
>
> What we say in lab

BEFORE THE REFERRAL

Unmotivated? Or is the task too challenging?

WHAT RESEARCHERS MEASURED

No significant difference.

On just-right tasks, persistence and pleasure in toddlers with motor delay didn’t differ significantly from their peers’.

WHAT THEIR MOTHERS REPORTED

“Less persistent.”

On a questionnaire, mothers rated the same toddlers as less persistent than their peers.

> **Before we call a child unmotivated, check the challenge.**

Wang et al., 2013 · 22 toddlers with motor delay vs. 22 mental-age-matched peers

Let it count.

The bell can be rung for victory.

It can be rung to test cause and effect.

It can be sound exploration.

Sometimes, the bell is the science.

Godin, 2026, OT Practice



OCCUPATIONAL PERFORMANCE

When the conditions line up



Environment
A fan you can adjust.

Person
A supporter who doesn’t take over.

Occupation
A feather with somewhere to go.

Person-Environment-Occupation Model: Law et al., 1996

OCCUPATIONAL PERFORMANCE · IN A REAL LAB

Okay, we get the community-OT part.

Tell me more about the OT-informed STEAM Lab.

In a community group, we design for participation before we know who’s coming.

BEHIND THE LAB · 45–60 MINUTES

Anatomy of a community OT lab

FIRST 10 MIN

Arrive

Coffee and muffins for the grown-ups. Kids head to the anchors.

THEN

Showstopper

A song, then science like a magic trick. The only part we “teach.”

MOST OF IT

Stations

Big energy, sensory, discovery, fine motor. We roam.

LAST

Close

Pete the Cat. Favorite moments. Something you learned.

ALWAYS OPEN: THE ANCHORS

Obstacle course, bubbles, chalk. A familiar place to land, and permission to leave and come back.

Environmental structure as part of co-regulation: Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017

BEHIND THE LAB · LIVE

First, the song.

“Little Scientists”

Then: Showstopper!

FROM THE LAB TO THE KITCHEN

Parents sent us these. The science went home.







BEHIND THE LAB

“We really only teach the showstopper.”

And even then, it’s better if we just let it be magic.

PARENTS TOLD US THE SAME THING

Keep the science simple. At this age, the science lives in the doing.

Beaton et al., 2026 · SJSU MSOT capstone, 3 parents

Bright Sparks Play Lab · 45–60 minutes · in the community

ONE LAB, START TO FINISH · ICE LAB

The story is the invitation.

“The ducks were treasure hunting when the ice volcano exploded. Can you warm the ducks up and grab some treasure while you’re at it?”

Showstopper: Will it glide? Ramps onto smooth ice
Big energy: shake-shake homemade ice cream
Sensory: ducks, gem-filled icebergs, nets, a warm bath
Fine motor: ice volcano
Discovery: foil, corks, string, dowels

Sound familiar? It’s the feather, with ducks.



ICE LAB · FINE MOTOR

The Ice Volcano

Spoon in the baking soda, squeeze in the vinegar, and wait for the eruption.



SOMETHING UNEXPECTED

The number of kids who just rubbed the baking soda into the melting ice was astounding.

GROUPS OF 2–3 · REALITY CHECK

What parts of the play lab set-up, caregiver coaching, or STEAM play would work in your setting or practice?

Where would it fall apart?

Clinic | Classroom | Community | Home

"Before the referral" means support that starts earlier, alongside referral pathways. Not instead of them.

Embedded OT in an early childhood centre is promising, and early: one centre, 10 weeks.

4–5 minutes · Counterexamples welcome

Bedard & Fyffe, 2026 · one-centre, 10-week pilot

WHAT WE WERE DESIGNING FOR

Curiosity, Choice, Competence, Connection, and Joy

Choice is volition, in plain words.

Joy is in the design. It’s welcome, never required.

Consistent with Dunst et al., 2001: interesting, engaging, competence-producing, mastery-oriented learning opportunities

THE QUESTION WE CARRY FORWARD

What has to be true for a child to get curious, engage in play, and build on it?

Before we ask how to change the child's participation, let's look closely at what the child is currently doing, their environment, and their felt connection.



BEFORE YOU GO

What’s one thing you’ll bring into your practice on Monday?

Our labs close with Pete the Cat and a favorite moment.

Now it’s your turn.

LET'S BUILD SOMETHING TOGETHER

The rough edges are often where we learn the most.

RESOURCES

Handout, powerpoint, and references

CONTACT

Thoughts?
Feedback?
Curiosities?

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BRIGHT SPARKS PLAY LAB · FOR FAMILIES

Sensory Play on the Go

Have bin, will travel

Small changes that make room for curiosity, connection, and fun. You don't need an elaborate activity or a perfect playroom. Start with one thing that makes play easier at your house.

Make a little "yes" space



Choose a spot where your child can explore and a little mess is manageable. A washable, waterproof picnic blanket helps contain the aftermath.

No easy-clean floor or outdoor space at home? Take your setup to the park. Bring your materials home afterward, including any spilled filler.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN, ASK YOURSELF

What can I set up now so I can relax and enjoy this, too?

A little treasure. A few tools. Lots of possibilities.

Jumbo gemstones (also known as treasure) and big jingle bells are favorites. Choose versions intended for your child's age. Add a few scoops, spoons, bowls, or mud-kitchen tools (pie pans, toddler-safe kitchen supplies), and let your child choose what to use.

Start with a small selection. They might collect, scoop, hide, transfer, or invent something you hadn't considered. You can add more as their play unfolds.

Leave them a part to do

Hold the container while they work on the lid. Steady the bowl while they stir. Offer help, then leave room for their response. "Want me to hold this?"

The goal isn't to leave them struggling. It's to help in a way that leaves them something meaningful to do.

Make a sensory table that packs itself

Two nesting storage bins can become an affordable, portable play station:

- **A shallow bin:** Think underbed storage. This holds the play materials.
- **A deep bin:** This supports the shallow play bin at a comfortable height. About 12–13 inches tall works well for toddlers.

A baking pan makes a great sensory tray, too.



Choose bins that fit securely together on level ground without sliding or tipping. Afterward, use them to store supplies or carry wet and dirty materials home.

Give their idea somewhere to go

If your child wants to throw, switch to soft, age-appropriate throwing materials and offer a target in a clear space. "Can this land in the basket?"

Model it once, then let them try. Keep it playful. Save hard treasures and bells for other kinds of exploration.

When you hear yourself repeating "Don't," pause and consider: Is there a workable way to say, "You can do that here"?

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Get on their level. Join what caught their attention.

Sit or position yourself comfortably beside them, where you can share the view. You don't need a better idea. Their idea is a good place to start.



Notice → Invite → Join

Notice



"You're kneading the dough."

Invite



The invitation lives in the space. Place another tool within reach and let them find it. Say it out loud only if it's a story.

An invitation can be taken, built upon, altered beyond recognition, or completely ignored.

Join



"I'm rolling some beside you. Thanks for letting me play, too!" Roll your own dough. Stretch it. Play alongside them and enjoy their company. Leave their creation in their hands.

You don't need to teach them how to roll a ball or make a snake. Squishing, poking, pulling, and exploring count as play, too. It's enough to be with them. Leave room for their version; they may surprise you with what they create.

Give it a story

The [object] wants to ____. Can we help him/her?

"The flamingos want to go to the dance party."



Let the play change

The animal's bed becomes a garage. The garage becomes a drum. Your original plan has been respectfully declined.

They can pause, move, and return. They don't have to finish something for the play to count.



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SENSORY PLAY ON THE GO · KEEP IT GOING

Observation is science too.

Participation can be quiet. A child watching from the edge is still taking part. Look for:

Watching · Starting · Choosing · Returning · Experimenting · Sharing

A quick safety check

Choose materials intended for your child's age and abilities. Expect mouthing, and stay nearby to supervise. **"Jumbo" is a description, not a safety rating.**

A small-parts test cylinder can help identify objects that are too small: if an item fits completely inside, keep it away from children under three. Not fitting does not guarantee safety. Check for damage, sharp edges, and parts that could detach, including pieces inside bells. Follow product age labels. Skip water beads around little kids. (cpsc.gov)

Want that water-bead feel? Colored pearl couscous is a safer swap (it contains wheat). Fair warning: it gets smashed into everything, blanket included.

You don't have to teach them how to play. They're already experts.

Jen Godin, MSOT, OTR/L · Bright Sparks Play Lab

Contact
Thoughts? Feedback? Curiosities?

BEHIND THE HANDOUT · FOR CLINICIANS

OT in the Wild: Toddlers Before the Referral · OTAC 2026

Start with a small selection
Toddlers played longer, and in more varied ways, with 4 toys than with 16. Dauch et al., 2018

Join what caught their attention
Infants' longer looks at a toy went with a parent sharing their focus. Suarez-Rivera et al., 2019

Leave them a part to do
When an adult took over, 4- and 5-year-olds persisted less afterward. Leonard et al., 2021

Give it a story
Story helped preschoolers explain the science; how the science was built in mattered most. Plummer & Cho, 2024

Coaching is not joining
The caregiver joins the child's play. You coach the caregiver. Two questions that help a caregiver reflect: **"What caught their attention?"** and **"What happens if we wait?"** Coaching elements: Ward et al., 2020

Notice → Invite → Join is a research-informed teaching frame from Bright Sparks Play Lab, not a validated intervention.

Slides, handout + references

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