

LIGHTING THE WAY WITH FOOD AND PLAY

Sessions & Speaker Bios

KEYNOTE SESSION

PLAY WITH YOUR FOOD!

Chef B. from Apples to Zucchini Cooking School brings you on an interactive journey into teaching cooking through PLAY. Discover simple, fun, and developmentally appropriate techniques that bring learning to life and inspire a lifelong love of food and cooking in young children.

About the Speaker | Chef Bethany Markee

Bethany Markee has over 28 years of experience in the restaurant industry and is professionally trained at a culinary school on the coast of Maine. Chef B. moved to the California coast in 1990 and has been working in the culinary field in central California ever since. Bethany truly has a deep love for cooking healthy foods and also educating students in nutrition, cooking, and wellness. She started her school nutrition & culinary teaching career in 2011 and has many accomplishments. Chef B. was the Director of Child Nutrition for both Orcutt Union School District and Solvang School District. She brought an increase in scratch cooking to their nutrition programs and created two very popular Culinary Arts Programs for students at both school districts. Teaching culinary arts has become Chef B.'s true passion. Chef B. currently lives in Solvang and has made teaching a full-time career with the Apples to Zucchini Cooking School.



KEYNOTE SESSION

THE PLAYFUL MIND: WHERE THINKING BEGINS

Play is not just a pastime—it is how humans have evolved to educate ourselves. Yet even though we recognize play when we see it, defining and understanding it can be surprisingly elusive. In this session, preschool play expert Tom "Teacher Tom" Hobson blends research with real-world stories to illuminate why play is the foundation of all deep and meaningful thinking. If we want children to grow into self-motivated, collaborative, lifelong learners, it must begin with play. You'll leave this session inspired and equipped to give children the time, space, and freedom they need to follow their curiosity, awe, and joy.

About the Speaker | Tom "Teacher Tom" Hobson

Tom "Teacher Tom" Hobson is an early childhood educator, education consultant, author, and parent educator. He is best known for his democratic progressive play-based pedagogy, which he shares enthusiastically in his blog, books, podcast, and through his popular courses for preschool teachers and parents of young children. He is a frequent keynote speaker at early years conferences around the world.



KEYNOTE SESSION

RAISING CHANGEMAKERS: NURTURING VOICE, VALUES, AND VISION

In today's world, even our youngest children can engage with big ideas—empathy, justice, sustainability, and wellness. This workshop explores how early childhood professionals can nurture a strong sense of Identity, Diversity, Justice, and Action in young learners through everyday practices and play-based experiences.

Using the Framework of Anti-Bias Education, we'll dig into practical, age-appropriate ways to support children as they explore these powerful concepts—while also deepening their connection to the natural world. From planting gardens and playing outside to making healthy choices and caring for their communities, we'll examine how early learning environments can foster both social responsibility and environmental stewardship.

Join us to reflect on your teaching practices, gather new tools, and reimagine your role in raising the next generation of changemakers—one small voice at a time.

About the Speakers

Jenna Janzen

Jenna has managed Ventura River Child Development Center since 2020, bringing over a decade of experience in early childhood education and leadership. She spent nine years in the classroom as a teacher, cultivating a deep understanding of child development and the essential role of play in learning. Holding a master's in clinical psychology with a specialization in Child Studies, Jenna's leadership is grounded in the belief that the relationships we build with each other, the children, and the families in our care are essential to the work we do. A passionate advocate for Anti-Bias Education, she is also committed to protecting a child's right to play and fostering inclusive environments where children and educators thrive together.



Jessica Derby

Jessica is the Program Director at Patagonia's Great Pacific Child Development Center. Her career began in 2000 in early education centers, where she spent over a decade working alongside children ages 0–5 before transitioning into leadership and higher education. Jessica holds a bachelor's degree in child development and a master's in early childhood education, which guides her teaching and leadership philosophy which are rooted in connection, mindfulness, social justice, and outdoor learning. She brings a unique blend of curriculum development, nature-based education, and administrative expertise to her work, and is known for fostering strong, collaborative relationships with children, families, educators, and community partners.



KEYNOTE SESSION

NOURISHING THROUGH PLAY: RECONNECTING WITH FOOD AND YOUR INNER CHILD

In this engaging one-hour session, Registered Dietitian and Nutritionist Mary Galindo invites you to rediscover the joyful connection between play, food, and self-care. By reflecting on your own childhood experiences, you'll uncover how reconnecting with your inner child makes nutrition lessons more fun, relatable, and sustainable. Together we'll explore playful strategies like food exploration, storytelling, and sensory activities; giving children choices and language to describe foods; celebrating cultural traditions; and encouraging curiosity through repeated, joyful exposures. You'll also learn how food connects to all aspects of life—health, culture, memory, and joy—and how mindful eating can serve as self-care for you. Leave with practical, creative ideas to turn nutrition into play—nurturing positive relationships with food for both you and your students.

Join us after this session for a Q&A with Mary and Nancy Weiss

About the Speakers

Mary Galindo

Mary Galindo serves as a lead educator and bilingual registered dietitian for Rooted Santa Barbara. Her expertise includes cardiac, brain health and gut health with a specialty in plant-based eating for prevention. Mary integrates Rooted's mission to close the fiber gap through culinary and nutrition education that celebrates cultural traditions. Her approach emphasizes the joy of food and the importance of community without extreme restrictions. She is passionate about meeting people where they are and providing practical next steps to build confidence and enthusiasm in their nutrition journey.



Nancy Weiss

After graduating from the University of California, Santa Barbara with a degree in English, Nancy went on to open SOHO Restaurant and Music Club in the mid 1980's in Santa Barbara. Owning and operating this local gem, Nancy not only built an award-winning restaurant but also a thriving live, local music venue in her community. From 2008-2020, Nancy was the Director of Food Services for the Santa Barbara School District (SBUSD). Weiss' reinvention of campus dining challenged the entire "School Food" model and continues to be an example for forward thinking school districts throughout the nation. Nancy is the recipient of the 2018 Santa Barbara Independent Local Hero Award, The Spirit of Service Award (from the City of Santa Barbara for commitment to composting and sustainability), The Golden Carrot Award (from the physicians committee for responsible medicine) and The 2017 Congressional Woman of the Year Award.



RED BREAKOUT SESSION

MATCHING THE DEVELOPMENTAL BENEFITS OF PLAY WITH PTKLFS

Play is not just fun—it's essential for learning. In this session, we will explore how different types of play can be intentionally linked to the PTKLF (Preschool/Transitional Kindergarten Learning Foundations) to meet developmental and academic goals for young children. We will discuss how to identify and articulate the learning outcomes embedded in various play experiences, and how to document and share these connections. This approach not only strengthens instructional planning, but also provides a strong foundation for meaningful conversations with school administrators about the value of play-based learning in achieving curriculum objectives in TK.

About the Speakers | Phoebe Ball & Loriann Mastromarino

Phoebe and Loriann are long-time friends, and are going on their third year as teaching partners at Hollister School in Goleta. After spending most of their careers in grades K-2, they are happy to have landed in TK. They are both extremely excited to be learning and growing their craft in the dynamic TK world. They have been exploring the connections between the PTKLF and types of play, and are working on creating a more play-based TK program.



YELLOW BREAKOUT SESSION

A VISIBLE LEADER

Join Beth Rizo, recently retired Director of SBCC's Orfalea Early Learning Center, to discuss the challenges and opportunities of being an early childhood center Director in Santa Barbara County.

About the Speaker | Beth Rizo

Beth recently retired as the Director of Orfalea Early Learning Center at Santa Barbara City College, and part-time instructor for the Early Childhood Education Department. Beth has worked with children, families, students and staff in Santa Barbara for over thirty years, and has been working in the field of Early Childhood Education for 45 years. She is married to her husband of 46 years, Enrique, and has two grown children as well as three grandchildren.

Beth is a mentor, coach, consultant and speaker, and she looks forward to what awaits in this new journey!



BLUE BREAKOUT SESSION

REAWAKENING TO WONDER: THE PLAYFUL PATHWAY TO WELL-BEING

Rachel Carson once asked that all children be gifted with “a sense of wonder so indestructible that it would last throughout life, as an unfailing antidote against the boredom and disenchantments of later years, the sterile preoccupations with things that are artificial, the alienation from the sources of our strength.” In our brief hour together, we will reawaken our own in-born sense of wonder through rich conversation and play, rediscovering for ourselves the wondrous ways that play, especially in the natural world, supports both children and adults to foster physical and mental well-being, creativity, resilience, flexibility, curiosity, health, and joy!

About the Speakers

Heather Fox

Heather Fox brings more than two decades of experience in early childhood education, program leadership, and family support. She holds a Master’s in Liberal Studies with a focus on Child Development and Cultural Studies from the University of Minnesota and a BA in Biopsychology from Nebraska Wesleyan University. Heather’s career has taken her from infant and toddler to leadership roles as Head Start Director, Early Childhood Specialist, and researcher with the HighScope Educational Research Foundation. Since 2010, Heather has served as Education Specialist with the Nature Explore program and as Director of Outreach Professional Growth and development.



Kirsten Haugen

Kirsten is an international speaker, workshop facilitator, and writer on connecting children with the natural world and creating and sustaining natural outdoor classrooms. As Research Director for Dimensions Educational Research Foundation, and Child Development Specialist for Nature Explore, she studies natural outdoor classroom approaches, develops and facilitates professional development experiences for educators, and collaborates with programs on outdoor classroom designs. Kirsten holds a B.A. in Human Biology from Stanford University, and an M.A. in Early Childhood Special Education from San Francisco State University.



GREEN BREAKOUT SESSION

GETTING PEOPLE ON BOARD AND OUTSIDE

Not everyone loves the outdoors or sees the benefit of natural play. How can we educate and motivate a buy-in as part of our stated philosophy, thus creating staff performance expectations, parent understanding, and board and funder enthusiasm?

About the Speaker | Michelle Robertson

Michelle Robertson is the Deputy Director of First 5 Santa Barbara County, also known as the Children and Families Commission. Prior to her current position, Michelle led the Early Education and Support Divisions for two south county school districts— Santa Barbara Unified and Carpinteria Unified— for ten years before returning to her work at the County of Santa Barbara. Throughout her career, she has worked as a classroom teacher and an Administrator, and has taught adjunct classes for Santa Barbara City College, Brandman University, Antioch University, and currently at Allan Hancock College in their Early Education Studies Department. Michelle holds a master's degree in educational leadership and social services from Pacific Oaks College and a bachelor's degree in American studies from CSU Long Beach. Her passions include nature and outdoor learning, language and literacy development, and developing systems of care that contribute to equity and access for all.



BREAKOUT SESSION

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

About the Teacher | Tracy Johansson

Tracy Johansson, NBC-HWC, is a nationally certified Well-Being Coach and mindfulness meditation teacher certified through Mindful Heart Programs in Santa Barbara. With an MA in clinical psychology, she combines expertise in mental health with evidence-based mindfulness practices to help individuals cultivate resilience and inner calm. As the founder of Essential Well-Being Coaching, she is passionate about guiding clients through life's challenges, fostering balance and fulfillment. Her approach emphasizes mindfulness, self-compassion, and nature connection, offering practices that foster kindness and compassion for self and others.

