

Episode 46 - Sherri Alderman

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto:** This is the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Thank you for listening. You can catch us on 99.1 FM in the Portland Metro on Sundays at 4:30 PM or tune in at your convenience wherever you find your podcasts. That includes iTunes, Spotify, Amazon Music, and on our website at childinst.org.

My guest today is Sherri Alderman. She is a developmental behavioral pediatrician, and is faculty at Portland State University with decades of experience advocating for child rights and deep experience working clinically and on policy in infant mental health. She is Chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Early Childhood, the AAP Early Childhood Champion in Oregon, the CDC Act Early Ambassador to Oregon. Sherri serves on the Oregon State government advisory council to the Oregon Health Authority Behavioral Health Division, and is Past President of the Oregon Infant Mental Health Association.

That's a lot. You must be very busy Sherri, and it's great to have you on the podcast today.

How are you?

[00:01:06] **Sherri Alderman:** I'm fine thanks. Thank you so much for having me. I should say that I'm not speaking, as a representative of the AAP. I am actually speaking as, as an individual. So I do have a private life as well.

[00:01:21] **Rafael Otto:** Absolutely. Great. Thank you for that clarification. I wanted to talk about the field of infant mental health a

little bit you know, from your perspective as a physician, as a pediatrician, what does that field look like? What does it entail and what does that mean for your work with young children and their families?

[00:01:41] **Sherri Alderman:** Well, that's a great question and my work has very much focused on infant mental health, both in the clinical practice of framework and also in advocacy. It really stems from two basic things I would say. One is that we all are really beginning to so appreciate the research that informs us how critically important those first few years are for healthy brain development.

It's a fabulous opportunity to set into motion an infant, a baby, or a young child on a path toward being academically successful, being a contributor to society and living a life of fulfillment. Yet at the same time, our system often forgets the babies. And so in infant mental health, we talk about keeping the baby in mind.

How will our work, how will our policies, how will our legislation take into consideration babies and the impact that it will have on babies? And so infant mental health is both a term, recognizing the importance of early brain development, and it's also a practice where we focus on supporting parents and caregivers to be the very best parents they aspire to be in that relationship with their infant or young child. And as an area of professional work, which really spans every aspect of that system of care for infants and young children and all of the professionals that are committed to that work, and provide a tremendous amount of time being with infants and young children and supporting families in that process.

[00:03:34] **Rafael Otto:** When I think about infant mental health, it's really an intentional focus on the social and the emotional health and development of young children. And you're speaking from your experience as a pediatrician, you have a relationship with families when you're working with young children, but then there's also, you know, we have to recognize that children and families are part of a larger system, right? And that's what you're talking about in terms of what the system can do and how it responds in the policies that we can create to support young children and their families. So is there anything else, can you say a little bit more about what that looks like or your work with families along those lines?

[00:04:13] **Sherri Alderman:** Absolutely. And what you just described so clearly is that one of the infant mental health principles, and that is the parallel process. And by that, I mean, just exactly what you said that we have this baby and this baby is within the bubble of relationships with caring adults and those adults are within a system that supports them. Whether they're parents or childcare providers or preschool teachers and or others, pediatricians, that system supports them, the professionals to be able to support the parents and caregivers who then are able to support, optimally support, their infant or young child. And we're all in this larger bubble of policies. And so the pediatrician or the childcare provider, each of the professionals within that infant and early childhood world need policies to support their capability and capacity to support communities. To support families so that we are all taking into consideration, keeping the baby in mind, in everything that we do, and also supporting each other in a network that takes the best interest of the child in mind.

[00:05:39] **Rafael Otto:** That's how it feels to me. It's a collective effort. When there are so many players involved in how, how our families thrive, how our children are raised in our communities. There's so many people involved in that work and I just think it's important to recognize that sometimes we have to remember that.

[00:05:57] **Sherri Alderman:** Yeah, and Children's Institute is a very important player in that process, that web of support with the best interest of the child in mind.

[00:06:09] **Rafael Otto:** Thank you for that. Yes. Our focus is often on the advocacy and policy side of things and we are continually looking for ways for communities to be involved in that, parents and families to be involved in those advocacy efforts, and even young children. I think there's lots of room to have young children be involved in those advocacy efforts and I want to talk to you about some of the things that you've done along those lines as well. And I know you've worked as an advocate for rights of children. Say more about that. When we talk about the rights of children, what does that mean? How do you define it and what could that look like?

[00:06:46] **Sherri Alderman:** All human beings have human rights around the world and those rights are intentionally creating a society that provides the opportunities, the supports, the basics that a human being needs to survive and thrive. Children are human beings and also have those human rights. They have additional vulnerabilities and factors that call for us to have rights specifically for children to support their health and well-being in addition to the basic human rights that all humans have. And so when I talk about, when I think about, and I advocate for child rights, what I'm saying is that there is not an

exhaustive list actually. A well-defined features, characteristics of aspects of rights that children are insured to have in order that they can develop strong social-emotional skills, so that they can thrive and build resilience and become flourishing adults in their lives. And so it's those special conditions for health and survival that children are entitled to those rights to thrive.

[00:08:19] **Rafael Otto:** I know you've worked as an advocate for the United Nations CRC Convention On the Rights of the Child. Talk about the history and background of that. Because that is an international framework that operates in the way that you're talking about this provides kind of a framework of rights for young children in societies across the world.

It's been signed and ratified by many countries. I think it's something like 195 or 196 countries have ratified this. Talk a little bit about the CRC and what it does and what it means.

[00:08:54] **Sherri Alderman:** The Convention On the Rights of the Child is a basic human rights document formulated by many countries from around the world in a 10- year process of coming to consensus on what it is, what are the basic rights that children must have to thrive. And in 1990, it was approved by the United Nations and went out to each member of the United Nations states to be ratified. And so it is by nature a culturally sensitive, culturally responsive, and universally applicable defined rights specific for children all over the world. As it is now the Convention On the Rights of the Child is the most widely ratified and most comprehensive human rights document in history.

[00:09:55] **Rafael Otto:** That's impressive and I wanted to, you know, I've been doing a little bit of reading here and there. There are the four kinds of core principles of the CRC that I want you to talk a little bit about. First one is non-discrimination, then there's devotion to the best interest of the child, right to life, survival and development, and then the fourth is respect for the views of the child. Talk about those core principles and how... what those mean when we're talking about rights for children?

[00:10:27] **Sherri Alderman:** Rights, human rights in general, are non-hierarchical and inalienable, and all work together. It's weaved in human rights. We do not pull one out as being the top of the heap, if you will. And they all work together. They support each other. And these core principles are ways of looking at how they - all of the rights. All of the articles on the convention of the rights of the child - do in fact work together to assure the health and wellbeing of children.

A non-discrimination for instance, a non-discrimination is called out in the articles. Actually, it is article number two in the Convention On the Rights of the Child. And a child must live in a society where they are protected from discrimination in order that Article 24 assurance to health and quality care can be reassured.

So you see that article two and article 24 work together to create an environment, a system, a society where children have access to optimal health and development. The second core principle, devotion to the best interest of the child, is what permeates the whole framework. And that is, we're always asking the question just like in infant mental health, and we're always asking the question, you know, what does this mean for the baby?

[00:12:00] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:12:01] **Sherri Alderman:** With the Convention On the Rights of the Child and assuring child rights, we're always asking the question about is this in the best interest of the child. And we know that a very important aspect of a quality life for a child is the relationship that they have with their parents.

And that secure attachment is what is going to be one of the most powerful factors that assure that this child will thrive and become a productive uh, adult who lives a fulfilling life. And so when we think about the best interest of the child, we're always assuring that what we're deciding, even if it doesn't mention the child per se, that it will be in the best interest of the child and that parents shall be a very important aspect of that picture. In fact, there are some people have concerns about the Convention On the Rights of the Child. Does it take away rights from parents.

[00:13:03] **Rafael Otto:** Right, right.

[00:13:05] **Sherri Alderman:** When in fact the Convention On the Rights of the Child mentions parents or family or responsible adults. Specifically talking about their rights as it relates to the rights of the child 14 times in the Convention On the Rights of the Child. So concrete evidence that those relationships with parents are critically important when we are talking about the best interest of the child.

[00:13:34] **Rafael Otto:** To what extent does the CRC address poverty?

[00:13:40] **Sherri Alderman:** The CRC addresses poverty through the human rights perspective.

[00:13:47] **Rafael Otto:** Okay.

[00:13:48] **Sherri Alderman:** It addresses the adverse impact of poverty on the child by assuring basic child rights. Such as, I've already mentioned article 24, talking about to assure that every child has access to optimal health, including health care.

Also in article 28 that talks about that every child has a right to education, which is addressing poverty. By that we mean when we're talking about the best interest of the child that's quality education. To give a child that optimal opportunity to live fulfilled lives and right to leisure and play, which is addressed in article 31.

This, we often times talk about children living in poverty, lack these opportunities that communities are under-resourced to be able to really realize the optimal quality of life that children and their families will experience. And so when we think about addressing poverty, we're really talking about addressing... preventing the adverse impacts of a low income community, a low income family.

And when we as a society say that all children, including children, living in poverty, shall have... be assured of these basic human rights, we are assuring that regardless of where they live, that, that they will have a quality of life that assures their survival, their development, and, and optimal health and well-being.

[00:15:34] **Rafael Otto:** To me, it's such a powerful declaration and it's inspiring to see it. And it's my understanding that the United States is the only country that has not ratified the convention. I believe the US has signed it, but not ratified.

Is that correct?.

[00:15:52] **Sherri Alderman:** Yes, that's correct. Yeah.

[00:15:54] **Rafael Otto:** Say more about that. Why do you think the United States has not ratified this Convention On the Rights of the Child?

[00:16:01] **Sherri Alderman:** It's a very complex question. It's baffling that the United States would stand alone in not ratifying it. Uh, it was signed by President Clinton, and the next step is for it to be sent to our legislature for ratification and out to the states. It has not gone to Congress.

President Clinton did not send it to Congress. When President Obama became president, one of his promises is that he would. It did not happen, uh, during his administration either. So the bottleneck is that it has not been sent to Congress. Of course when it goes to Congress, then it has to be acted upon as well.

So I would say that the timing has not been right yet for ratification in the United States. And some of the pushback or the concerns that it would not be ratified stem from misunderstandings about the Convention On the Rights of the Child.

[00:17:09] **Rafael Otto:** That's what I wanted to ask you. Because it seems like some of the points that are contested around... there's this sort of underlying fear that it might take away parent rights.

[00:17:20] **Sherri Alderman:** Yes and as I said, when one looks at the articles specifically, it assures rights for parents on recognizing that parents are very important when we're thinking about the best interest of the child. So that is a misunderstanding of the Convention On the Rights of the Child.

And when we talk with parents, we can have political differences. We can have, even to a certain extent, some ideological differences. However, I have found consistently when I engage in an authentic way with a parent about the best interest of their child, we have a common ground of... for engagement there. And that's very warming, uh, that's also a tremendous opportunity for, for moving forward together when we think about the best interest of every child in every family.

[00:18:18] **Rafael Otto:** Can you talk about or provide an example of the impact of having signed the CRC or what that's looked like in another country after ratification? What kinds of changes have we seen or what has been the result of ratifying?

[00:18:33] **Sherri Alderman:** It varies a lot from country to country, nation to nation. The countries who have ratified it then fall into a responsibility to be accountable for how they are realizing the rights of children in their country. There's a lot of flexibility in that. There's a lot of disparities from country to country as to how many resources they have available to do the work. And so that flexibility and some supports

from the United Nations delivered in an equitable way. Do support countries to work toward full realization of child rights in their country.

An example in looking close to home is Canada. And I'll use a really specific example of that. Canada has ratified the Convention On the Rights of the Child and they have moved forward with it. They are a more resourced country than others around the world. One thing they have done in the spirit of assuring child rights is they have a curriculum in their schools now where children learn about child rights. And they studied this because there was some hesitation, fearing that children would leave with that knowledge about child rights and use it as a threat against parents. And what they found is when they surveyed those children after getting this education on child rights is that the children, rather than being a proponent of their own rights, became advocates for the rights of their peers. Isn't that powerful? I mean, that's the beauty of working with kids. And what I think about is wouldn't that be a powerful and effective strategy for addressing bullying in schools?

[00:20:31] **Rafael Otto:** Right, right. That's a great example. Thank you for sharing that. Children are always... they're... they're inspiring me and us every day, here at Children's Institute. So it's a great example. So the US has not ratified the Convention but states could if they wanted to. And Oregon could ratify the Convention On the Rights of the Child if it wanted to, right?

[00:20:56] **Sherri Alderman:** That's absolutely right. Yeah, yeah. And we would be the first state in the country to do so if we did.

[00:21:04] **Rafael Otto:** It sounds like an opportunity for Oregon. What would it take to do that? What would it look like? What would have to happen in the governor's office?

[00:21:11] **Sherri Alderman:** Well, I am not a legislator. I am certainly not an expert on state government processes. But I have talked with some people who are far more knowledgeable than I am. And while I don't know what would be the best way for Oregon to ratify the Convention On the Rights of the Child, I do hear that there might be a couple of options. It could be legislated, or it could be an executive order by the governor...

So exactly how that would happen, I would not be the best person to answer that question. However, it does align with the values that we all cherish here in Oregon. Uh, the emphasis on families, the importance of early childhood, the embracing and bridging role in urban geographic areas. I see a lot of benefits and one benefit that I think could be really powerful is if Oregon were to embrace in a formal way, the Convention On the Rights of the Child and child rights, it would be a scaffolding of framework within which all of us could operate together. It could break down silos. It could open opportunities for innovative partnerships. It could create a common goal that is assuring a right for a child in the policies and the practices that we all work toward achieving. And it could pull the pieces together and identify gaps, and build this system that we're all working toward, and build it together so that all children have optimal opportunities from all over the state.

[00:23:03] **Rafael Otto:** Sounds great. I would love to see Oregon move forward with that. I also wanted to ask you about the importance of amplifying the voice and perspective of young children. I know that's

important to you. I know you have some stories about what that's looked like from your perspective as a pediatrician. What are some of the things that you're seeing? Why is that important? How can we do it better?

[00:23:29] **Sherri Alderman:** As a developmental behavioral pediatrician, I focused my career on infants and young children and their families in thriving communities. And what I see is that optimal development and behavior begins with children practicing, children playing roles. That's the way children learn.

And when we talk about the voice of the child, first of all, children have a voice and to the degree that it is appropriate for their developmental age, they should be provided the opportunity to exercise that voice. To hear themselves formulating what their ideas are, and for us adults to listen and work really hard to understand what they're communicating. Because they're communicating really powerful information from their perspective, which is very important. And from a more practical perspective, we wish that adults will be active participants in society and they will exercise their civic responsibilities. And when we provide children at a very young age and onward, the opportunity to find their voice and to learn ways of appropriately exercising that voice, we're supporting their developmental process to become civic, responsible citizens as adults.

[00:25:08] **Rafael Otto:** I love that. You've shared a story with me before about how young kids can get involved in an election. You know, develop their sense of civic responsibility, really. You know, is a learning tool and as a way for, you know, as an opportunity for children to express themselves and their point of view,

Will you share that story?

[00:25:33] **Sherri Alderman:** Yeah, I would love to, thanks. Before I moved to Oregon, I practiced in and lived in New Mexico. And when I was in New Mexico, I decided to courageously take the steps forward to create the Children's Presidential Election. And it came from my experiences and more importantly, my son's experiences when he was five years old, when we were living in Costa Rica.

Costa Rica, every four years has a children's presidential election nationwide and children really get into it. And they even allowed my son to vote in this presidential election. And when they vote, you get your thumb stamped and the children would even walk around showing the stamp that they'd gotten on their thumb after having voted. So...

[00:26:24] **Rafael Otto:** The badge of honor.

[00:26:25] **Sherri Alderman:** As a badge of honor.

So children learn through play. And this was play. Although for them, they took it very seriously. And so I decided to recreate that as best I could in New Mexico.

I pull together a fabulous team of other mothers who are also interested, and we actually created a city-wide in Albuquerque, Children's Presidential Election. We had moving boxes that were transformed into voting booths and ballot box. We made it very playful, colorful, inviting. The local libraries were very welcoming and open to sharing their space for families to come in and bring their children, and their children to vote.

It was really very, very fun. Very informational and very experiential for, uh, the children who participated in the election. And the next four years later, we repeated it and actually the secretary of state loaned voting booths and the children actually got to vote on real, real voting booths. Yeah, it was very exciting. And everybody was really behind it. It was fun.

[00:27:41] **Rafael Otto:** And, uh, what did the results look like? Were there are different results for that for them, the votes from the kids? Or were they the same as the state or the national result?

[00:27:51] **Sherri Alderman:** Yeah. In Costa Rica, they said they had a long standing record of the Children's presidential election results very closely predicted what the next day's adults' presidential election, what result would be.

In Albuquerque, that was also the case . Even though one very warm moment for me, delightful moment for me, when I was in the voting area, the image, I still remember it like it was yesterday, image of a young boy. He was probably, I would say, seven years old came in and well behind him was his mother. And he was walking with determination, picked up his ballot, went straight to the voting booth. And a while he was in the voting booth, his mother kind of looked with a pretty serious look on her face and said that, he was very excited to come in that day and vote. And he was voting for the candidate that she would not be voting for the next day. So it doesn't always have to be that the children vote the way the parents do.

[00:28:58] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah. Yeah. I love that. We might have to tap your expertise and organize something like that for Oregon.

[00:29:07] **Sherri Alderman:** Oh, that'd be great. That would be a dream come true.

[00:29:10] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah. I would love to see that.

Well, Sherri, it's been so good to have you on the podcast today. I really appreciate your time. It's great speaking with you.

[00:29:19] **Sherri Alderman:** Oh, it's great to speak with you. It's just always a fun topic. And it just brings delight and smiles to people's faces, when we think about children being an active citizen in society as is developmentally appropriate and I look forward to more such conversations anywhere.

[00:29:38] **Rafael Otto:** Thank you so much.

[00:29:41] **Sherri Alderman:** Thank you.