

Resources for Infant Educators and Montessori Assistants to Infancy: Two Complimentary Approaches to Working with Infants and Toddlers

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In the Fall of 2013, at the Portland Montessori Collaborative (pdxMC) in Portland, Oregon, a small group of men and women came together to take a RIE® Foundations course with RIE Associates, Polly Elam and Mary Louise Brennan. Among this group, were a handful of Montessorians, myself included. What these people knew and what I hope to convey in this article, is that Magda Gerber's Educaring® Approach is a philosophy that compliments and supports Infant and Toddler Montessori environments.

RIE® (pronounced "rye") is a philosophy for parents and caregivers of children from birth to 2 years of age developed by Magda Gerber, a child therapist and infant specialist. Gerber immigrated to the United States from Hungary in 1957. She was influenced by the work of Hungarian pediatrician and friend, Dr. Emmi Pikler. Dr. Pikler ran a residential home, Loczy, for infants in Hungary and was concerned with the challenges of providing quality group care to young children. Pikler's simple yet revolutionary approach to infant care inspired many. In 1978, based on her work with Emmi Pikler and her own experiences with young children, Magda Gerber founded Resources for Infant Educators (RIE), a non-profit organization based out of Los Angeles. She also edited and authored books about RIE® such as *The RIE Manual*, *Dear Parents* and *Your Self Confident Baby*. Today, RIE® is an international organization with Associates in multiple countries. However, its influence is still heavily concentrated in the Los Angeles area. The Alliance of RIE® Associates and the Board of Directors are committed to protecting the integrity of Gerber's work and are currently focusing on expanding the scope of her influence through their various courses, publications, and media outreach.

Based on my Infant & Toddler Montessori credential and my recent participation in the RIE® Foundations: Theory and Observation™ course, I am currently experimenting with combining the Educaring® Approach & Montessori Philosophy in our Infant and Toddler classrooms at Tiny Revolution Montessori. This article will focus on these select principles of the Educaring® Approach that we have recently implemented:

- Uninterrupted Play & Open-ended Materials
- Emphasis on Caregiving Routines
- Movement
- Primary Caregiving & Continuity of Care

Uninterrupted Play & Open-ended Materials

"Observe more, do less, enjoy more." – Magda Gerber

Gerber believed that infants should be allowed to do what she called "baby work." Adults do not facilitate an infant's play, instead their role is to simply provide open-ended

materials that can be easily manipulated and then observe what the babies do. This allows the baby to be the master of her own discovery. Common materials found in a RIE® infant class are cloth scarves, metal cups, containers, balls, everyday objects that are interesting and stimulate an infant's curiosity. There is not an emphasis on order or sequence of activity; instead children manipulate their environment free of adult interruption or direction. They do what they are motivated to do according to their own natural development. Parents and caregivers respect infants by allowing this natural curiosity and discovery and learn about the children in their care by observing their activity.

Emphasis on Caregiving Routines

"When you hold an infant, hold him not just with your body, but with your mind and heart." – Magda Gerber

Gerber felt that the time to interact and bond with infants is during caregiving activities such as feeding, diaper changes, bathing and dressing. These are activities that every caregiver and infant must participate in already so why not make them meaningful? Instead of rushing through these activities or distracting the baby with toys, use these opportunities to truly connect. Hold eye contact and talk with the child, tell them what you are doing and pause to allow the infant to respond to your words and requests. Even if an infant is very young or preverbal, showing this level of respect will shape the way they view themselves and their relationship with you. They will begin to anticipate these pauses and start to react and to PARTICIPATE! Gerber coined this way of interacting with infants as "educaring." If an adult always interacts with a baby in this way they will begin to see and understand each other's specific communication cues, their body language, facial expressions and verbalizations. The child will view themselves as an active participant in their own care. This level of respect allows a child to be self-confident and capable from a very young age.

Movement

"If we give children enough space and possibilities for free movement, they will move as beautifully and gracefully as animals: nimbly, simply, confidently and naturally." – Dr. Emmi Pikler

Similar to Maria Montessori, Magda Gerber was very focused on the movements of infants and young children. RIE® environments are furnished with a variety of apparatuses for gross motor exploration and the study of infant movement is paramount to the Educaring Approach. Infants should be free to reach movement milestones naturally without assistance from an adult. Infants are not propped to sit or persuaded to walk while holding an adult's hands. Instead, caregivers patiently and respectfully wait until a child can get into a position on her own. For example, a child would not be laid on their stomach, i.e. "tummy-time," until they are able to roll over into that position on their own. "If children are put on their backs from the beginning of life and no one manipulates them by putting them into positions they can't get into themselves, they will

learn to turn over, creep, crawl, sit, stand, and walk on their own. They accomplish all this by playing with each movement over and over and becoming absorbed in each little detail. “They are scientists studying movement, they prove to be highly competent, independent learners.” (Gonzalez-Mena 139).

Primary Caregiving & Continuity of Care

“Predictability brings about security” – Magda Gerber

In centers inspired by Gerber’s teachings, each caregiver is responsible for a small group (four or less) of infants or toddlers. This caregiver is responsible for the majority of their caregiving activities, daily recordkeeping and parent communication. Primary caregiving is not meant to be an exclusive or isolated relationship. Each child also has a designated secondary caregiver that interacts with the child on a daily basis and is available when the primary caregiver is not. Caregivers work as a team and rely on strong communication and awareness. If the infant and toddler children are placed in different classrooms according to age then the primary caregiver transitions with their group of children to each subsequent environment, this is continuity of care. This type of care epitomizes the partnership between parents and caregiver. Parents know that there is always one person who is specifically interested and responsible their child’s care during their days away from home. The trend towards full- time workweek care for infants is rapidly increasing and centers are scrambling to keep up with demand while continuing to offer quality care. Primary caregiving is a great option for all infant classrooms; it protects the child from continuously attaching and detaching with multiple and rotating adults. It allows them to build a strong and secure attachment with one or two caregivers. As current research on attachment suggests, this relationship will form the basis for the child’s exploration of themselves and their environment.

Anyone with Montessori experience can see the parallels between the Educaring® Approach and Montessori philosophy. Both women were tirelessly motivated to advocate for the child; treating them with the respect and reverence they deserve. One of the benefits of the Educaring Approach is that it is based on research on how to best serve children in group settings. Unfortunately, Maria Montessori did not focus on the infant and toddler until late in life, and was unable to delve as deeply into the method and best practice as Gerber. There is not a “Montessori’s Own Handbook” for infant and toddler teachers. Caring for the youngest of children in group settings can be rife with challenges and compromises. RIE® is an invaluable resource for Montessori teachers who are searching for a greater understanding of infant and toddler care. Attending the RIE Foundations: Theory and Observation course altered my view and taught me to see with new lenses. I am truly enjoying the ongoing experiment of combining the two philosophies in the hopes of providing the best, most respectful care for infants and toddlers.

“The way we care for our babies is then how they experience our love.” – Magda Gerber

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Helping Children to Help Themselves - Dressing and Undressing by Mercedes Paine Castle

Supporting your child's independence in dressing and undressing at home can make a difference in how successful they are in such activities at school. An inconsistent expectation between home and school might create disharmony. If we are asking a child to do something that they have limited experience with at home, this may be frustrating, and this learning process may take longer. When parents and teachers work together in service of the child, we can limit these frustrations and misunderstandings.

At school, the teachers start breaking down the steps to pushing off pants, removing diapers, and sitting on the toilet from infancy. Our expectation of the child changes as they grow and mature, and we are always observing each child for their signs of readiness for the next level of difficulty. Together, we work towards a goal that elicits a maximum effort, gained through cooperation and effort towards a new or higher skill level. In our experience, children under two years of age are successful in taking off and putting on their shoes and clothing. Regardless of age, the teachers approach dressing and undressing as a practical life skill, and encourage children to be as independent as possible in these endeavors.

In our school, we support each child in their unique place of their own development. Important growth and development happens when children negotiate and overcome challenges. The feeling of accomplishment that one gets when a challenge is overcome is the reinforcement and the independence that the child achieves is their reward for successfully negotiating a problem or acquiring a new skill.

This feeling of accomplishment is what encourages perseverance in the face of difficulty. These relatively small accomplishments of basic skills reward the curious, encourage problem solving as transformative play, and they form the solid foundation on which a healthy sense of self is built. They will become the kind of person who challenges themselves in learning new skills and exploring new cultures throughout their life. They will try even when they are not positive that they will succeed. They will be carried forward by their intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation will authentically motivate an individual to successfully negotiate the world around them.

In our classrooms, we focus on encouragement as opposed to praise. When we encourage a child, their intrinsic motivation is supported through thoughtful words and caring gestures. When supporting this idea of intrinsic motivation we recognize that feedback that places value on the teacher's approval or disapproval is counterproductive. Instead of saying "Good job" we might instead say "Wow, you worked really hard and you got those pants on all by yourself! Now you are ready to go play outside." or maybe "Was that 'I can' or 'I can't'?" or "Who put those pants on? You did! All by yourself!"

Along with encouragement we are sure to give them the time that they need to negotiate the task at hand. When we do things for the child that they are capable of doing on their own we deny them the experiences that they may need to grow. Specifically, we remove opportunities for a child to negotiate their own needs and practice being independent. Becoming proficient at dressing is a process, and children need lots of practice in order to get better at it. The more practice the better. Many young children are drawn to their cubbies and the bathroom, driven by their own unconscious desire to understand and become proficient in this process.

Here are some ways that you can support your child in dressing and undressing at home :

- Place your child's clothing in a place that they can easily access. Jackets and rain pants on low hooks in an appropriate area for them to change. Daily clothes in a dresser or low shelf that can be easily accessed and operated. If they pull all their clothes out they have just created an excellent opportunity to learn how to put their clothes away. Remove any weather inappropriate clothing. Bringing parent and teacher expectations into harmony serve the child in her growth and development.

- Supply your child with clothing that can be operated successfully. Buttons, zippers and snaps are difficult but not impossible. Practice at home until your child is proficient with the challenge presented before you bring those jeans to school. When your child can operate their overalls successfully at home all by themselves they are ready to come to school in them.
- Eliminate stretchy type pants from your girl's wardrobe. Sweat pants with bunched ankles, stretch pants with narrow openings are frustrating for both the children and a teacher. Feet often get stuck going through. Make sure that the foot hole is wide enough for a foot to go into and out of easily.
- Lay out clothing for school the next day the night before to smooth morning conflict. Involve your child in choosing their clothes for the next day and even laying them out. The more children are a part of the processes governing their lives the more they will want to participate in those processes.
- Allow time in the morning for your child to take the time that they need to be independent in dressing. This can be quite difficult but everyone will have a happier morning if you can schedule enough time. No one likes to be rushed. It can feel extremely frustrating to a child that is trying to accomplish a task.
- When dressing, establish an order in which clothes go on and stick to it. Try to include your child in setting the order even let them take the lead. This order helps reinforce the routine, and brings comfort when familiar. Once it's been established don't change it arbitrarily – shifts happen gradually over time, honor these by observing and respond confidently once a new strategy is planned and discussed.
- Isolate the difficulty in taking off each item of clothing. When removing a shirt, show your child how to pinch the end of the sleeve and pull their arms out one arm at a time. Then let them push their shirt up over their head themselves.
- Isolate the difficulty in putting on each item of clothing. When putting on a shirt, start by stretching the neck hole a bit and place it just over your child's head. Let them pull the shirt down themselves. Hold the shirt at the bottom, so that the arm holes are easily accessible.
- Push pants off at the waistband. We don't really pull pants down, rather they are pushed. Tuck a finger in your child's waistband and say “ Push here, can you feel my hand? “
- Lay pants out on the floor. Show your child the waistband, and the tag goes in the back. Crouch behind your child and pinch the waistband so that they can see the opening. If they get both legs in one hole, let that happen. When your child notices, you can say “I see you have both legs in one hole, let's try again.”
- If your child gets stuck, acknowledge their feelings. If they ask for help, say “What part do you need help with?” Something that I say is “I am helping you with my words.” Sometimes, all it takes is you putting your hand on their clothing to move forward. You might say “Can you feel my hand at your waistband?”
- Enjoy this time with your child. Use laughter and tickles to diffuse tension. Caregiving routines are esteem building moments truly they are moments when we connect and grow together.

You can support your child at school in dressing and undressing by making sure that their clothing is weather appropriate, media free (except for underpants), and hold the promise of successful independent operation. The best type of pants have an elastic waistband and wide leg holes. The best shirts have a large neck opening, free of snaps and buttons, and are loose enough to operate independently. Slip-on or Velcro-fastened shoes are ideal. Clothing and shoes should fit properly.

With parents and teachers working together to bring our expectations of the child into harmony, we serve the child in their growth and development. We support the child in learning how to dress and undress. When we liberate the child from their dependence on adults for these self care routines, we free them to experience a deeper sense of connection with the adults in their lives and a sense of accomplishment that they carry with them on their life journey.

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