

FAMILY MATTERS

Some helpful resources for 'educarers' of infants

By Chloe Learey

We opened an infant room at The Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development last summer knowing there was a critical need for infant care in our community. While we did not have a specific approach in mind in the planning phase, we were incredibly fortunate to get Nancy McMahon as the lead teacher for that room. Nancy brought with her a commitment to developing the program using the Educaring approach, also known as R.I.E. (Resources for Infant Educarers). This model was created by Madga Gerber after she worked with Dr. Emmi Pikler, a pediatrician in Budapest, Hungary. Gerber is the author of "Dear Parent and Your Self Confident Baby (with Allison Johnson)".

Nancy talks about this approach in episode 13 of "Family Matters", an award-winning talk show on BCTV that focuses on topics of interest about young children and families.

Fundamentally this approach is based on respecting and trusting infants as human beings born with strengths and skills, including the ability to actively engage in and create their environment with caregivers. The goal is to help children be "authentic", that is to feel secure, autonomous, competent and connected.

One of the strengths of this approach is that it offers principles from which to ground our work, not prescriptions for what to do. Every child is unique and thus may need something different to feel secure, or to feel connected. These principles also align well with our Touchpoints approach, and include the following:

- **Trust in the infant's competence:** We have basic trust in the infant to be an initiator, to be an explorer eager to learn what he is ready for. Because of this trust, we provide the infant with only enough help necessary to allow the child to enjoy mastery of her own actions.
- **Sensitive observation:** Our method, guided by respect for the infant's competence, is observation. We observe carefully to understand the infant's communications and his needs. The more we observe, the more we understand and appreciate the enormous amount and speed of learning that happens during the

first two or three years of life. We become more humble, we teach less, and we provide an environment for learning instead.

- **Caregiving times:** involving the child: During care activities (diapering, feeding, bathing, dressing, etc.), we encourage even the tiniest infant to become an active participant rather than a passive recipient of the activities. Parents create opportunities for interaction, cooperation, intimacy and mutual enjoyment by being wholeheartedly with the infant during the time they spend together anyway. "Refueled" by such unhurried, pleasurable caring experiences, infants are ready to explore their environment with only minimal intervention by adults.

- **A safe, challenging, predictable environment:** Our role is to create an environment in which the child can best do all the things that the child would do naturally. The more predictable an environment is, the easier it is for babies to learn. As infants become more mobile, they need safe, appropriate space in which to move. Their natural, inborn desire to move should not be handicapped by the environment.

- **Time for uninterrupted play and freedom to explore:** We give the infant plenty of time for uninterrupted play. Instead of trying to teach babies new skills, we appreciate and admire what babies are actually doing.

- **Consistency:** We establish clearly defined limits and communicate our expectations to develop discipline. Sometimes it can be challenging to apply these principles to the little people who are so dependent on others to survive in the world, whether it is seeing their competences or involving them in their own care. It requires a tremendous amount of patience and intention, and a commitment to continuing to learn and grow ourselves as caregivers.

The results are worth it, though, creating an environment that helps children develop optimally during a time where their learning and brain development is exponential. Helping children be the confident and competent in who they are and in the world around them is one of the strongest building blocks we can give them in early childhood learning and development. It is the foundation of their future success.

Chloe Learey is the executive director of Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development in Brattleboro. You can watch episodes of FAMILY MATTERS by visiting <http://winstonprouty.org/>