

## How Are the Children? The children are loved, respected, and learning every day!

Written by Margot Entwisle

*“An infant always learns. The less we interfere with the natural process of learning, the more we can observe how much infants learn all the time.”*

educator and author, Magda Gerber



Try to imagine what it was like to be a newborn infant. It is a moment in time we all hold in common, yet few of us consciously remember. The world was brand new, filled with a multitude of first-time experiences. At birth, infants experience their bodies being outside the protection of the womb for the first time, absorbing the newness of their emerging senses. They instinctively seek nourishment, warmth, and the intimacy of touch. Given space and time, a newborn infant will actively creep up their mother's belly to nurse, a miraculous journey to behold. From the moment of birth, the newborn seeks to engage with their primary caregiver and with their environment.

In recent decades, scientists began to develop new methods to test and understand the infant mind. They are finding proof that even the youngest infants are actively engaged in absorbing and processing new information, noticing every detail in their environment. An infant's attention can be drawn to dust particles, visible in a ray of light, as much as to the wooden rattle lying alongside them. Everything is captivating and worthy of keen observation and curiosity. An infant's capacity to see the wonders of the world is boundless.

Babies are intuitive self-learners. When they are cared for with loving respect, their inborn capacities and natural desire to learn are free to develop and flourish. The security and sense of well-being a baby experiences through an adult's loving care and attention are what enables them to grow and thrive into the fullness of who they are as individuals. When parents and caregivers give themselves time to observe and engage with loving interest and attention, they are gifted with the opportunity to see the baby's unique individuality as it begins to emerge.

What is respectful loving care and attention? Respectful loving care is shown in the way we interact with babies, and how we engage with and involve babies in the activities of daily life, such as feeding, bathing, diapering, and dressing. Daily caregiving activities are an opportunity to give our babies undivided attention. *“I'm going to get you dressed to go outside. First, we will put one arm in your sweater, then the other...here is a warm hat for your head.”*

With the devotion of our full attention, our language—speaking or singing—is calm, unhurried, reassuring, and gentle, inviting the baby to participate. Soon the baby will learn to expect what comes next, and will often hold up their arm to receive the sweater's

sleeve. If a baby is having a hard time cooperating, this can also be acknowledged by saying, “*You are having a hard day today*”. These activities give adults the opportunity to be in tune, both to themselves and to the baby’s cues. It is a time for both caregiver and child to refuel at a soul level, and for babies to know that their participation is expected and valued.

Diapering is often an activity we try to rush through, as efficiently as possible. This ordinary caregiving activity, repeated many times over the course of a day, is a time to connect with babies, to sing to them, to offer soothing touch, to invite participation. It is a time when babies are learning about their bodies and how to care for themselves. Even young babies are capable of helping to unsnap their clothing, holding a wipe, and lifting their legs...they just need an invitation to participate. My twenty-three-year-old son still remembers the t-shirt his father often wore while lovingly changing his diaper when he was a baby.

Respectful care and attention is also about allowing babies to move freely with their own bodies—free of baby carriers, baby wraps, swings, car seats, and free of adult intervention. Just as important as devoting undivided attention during care-giving activities is creating the opportunity, each day, for babies to move independently, exploring with their bodies in a safe space that adults create for them. This can be a small, child-safe room or area near where their caregiver might be working, or a shady spot outdoors under a tree, anyplace where babies are able to sense or hear the adult’s nearby presence. A smooth, soft-yet-firm surface or blanket, and one or two simple play objects is all that’s needed for “*floor time*” each day.

Babies don’t need anyone to teach them how to move and play. They instinctively know what they need to grow, both physically and emotionally, trying out and practicing movements as they develop new skills. Allowing our babies the time and space to play and master the physical milestones—rolling, crawling, and walking at their own pace—gives them the opportunity to grow fully into their own bodies. It is a time for infants to discover joy and satisfaction with their own independence, and is important for their physical, social, and emotional development.

Creating predictable rhythms and rituals is one of the most respectful and loving things adults can do for infants! Babies are growing and developing so rapidly that change is a daily occurrence. But babies are reassured when they are held within a secure, predictable rhythm, one that brings comfort and security within an ever-changing world. When babies know what to expect, the simplest rituals empower them, and they are free to immerse themselves in their exploration and play. Knowing when the curtains will be opened, when there will be time for outdoor play, floor time, mealtimes, evening bath, and when they will be rocked to sleep to the sound of a beloved lullaby—all bring comfort and peace. Predictable daily rhythms provide a nourishing framework, supporting the health of parents, caregivers, and particularly, the health of babies. The beauty of rhythms is that they grow over time, as the baby’s world grows and expands, to include weekly, monthly, and seasonal rhythms.

Babies also give adults the opportunity to grow and expand in ways never imagined. Each new birth brings the promise of hope into our lives. Babies inspire us to look more fully at the world around us, to envision new ways of seeing—and they have much to teach us!

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