



## Respect

### The Heart of Serving Infants and Toddlers

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**Toni Christie**

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With palms open and outstretched, an early childhood educator says to Charlotte, a 9-month-old, “Would you like a diaper change?”

When the child turns her body away from the teacher she says, “I’ll wait until you are ready.” Then she adds, “You let me know when you are ready.”

The child appears to think for almost 90 seconds and then scoots on her bottom, waving her hands at her caregiver. The teacher scoops the child up saying, “Oh, you would like a diaper change.”

This was a standard interaction at the early childhood center where I conducted an extensive observational study in Wellington, New Zealand. Far more often, during more than 20 years working in early childhood education, I've seen an educator announcing "Who's done a poo?" and then randomly pulling out the back of each infant's diaper to sniff for the incriminating evidence.

If you compare these two interactions, there is no doubt which is more sensitive, more empowering to the child, and more respectful. I believe that respect is the most significant aspect of programs serving infants and toddlers. Respect—treating with consideration—was the overarching feature behind the values and actions of teachers I observed for more than six months in one of the four Childspace infant and toddler centers that I co-own with my husband (Christie 2011). As the director of the Childspace Early Childhood Institute, which offers professional development and study tours, my goal with this study was to explore these respectful practices and share them with other early childhood educators interested in creating a similar caregiving environment.

The center provides full-time care for 20 children under 2 years of age, including eight infants ages 4 to 15 months. In the infant room, the adult-child ratio is one to four, with an additional center manager who works on the floor but is not factored into the ratio. I observed and interviewed the two infant teachers and the center manager.

## Ethics of care

The ethics of care discourse provides a foundation for discussing infant and toddler caregiving due to its emphasis on empathy and respect (Noddings 1984; Tronto 1993; Goldstein 1998; Dahlberg & Moss 2005). The general premise is that "caring is not something you are, but rather something you engage in, something you do" (Goldstein 1998, 247). The word *care* as it pertains to teaching is often linked to feelings, personality traits, or a person's temperament. However, some scholars argue that this simplistic view of care obscures the "complexity and intellectual challenge of work with young children" (Goldstein 1998, 245).

Caring is the process of putting aside your own choices, preferences, and ideas to welcome another

person's preferences. It "involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference and into the other's" (Noddings 1984, 24). When teachers see and meet infants' needs and desires, they care for each infant in an individualized and appropriate manner. For example, Ms. Diana may believe that Luca has no need for his special monkey from home, but in reading his gestures and cues she sees that he is anxious after his mother leaves; she decides to offer him the monkey, putting aside her own beliefs, and finds that holding the monkey calms him.

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## Careful, peaceful observation

Even the youngest children, who express opinions through subtle signs and gestures, deserve to have their human rights upheld (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child 2003). Through observation, teachers learn what each child wants, needs, likes, and dislikes, as well as gather information about what individuals can do and what their emerging capabilities are. Careful observation enables teachers to go further than feeling empathy. Instead of asking "What would *I* want if I were her?," they consider "What does *she* want?" I saw an example of this while studying Ms. Kea's interactions.

When Ms. Kea put away Liv's pacifier because she thought Liv (9 months) did not need it, Liv didn't complain. But Ms. Kea noticed that Liv started to look anxious, so she interpreted Liv's desire and gave the pacifier back, saying "Do you feel you need that?" Liv put the pacifier down beside her and continued to explore without it (and without looking anxious).

Seeing things from another's perspective requires teachers to pay close attention to the children. I have labeled it *peaceful observation* to highlight that neither the teacher nor the child makes demands of the other.

## Teachers invite children to engage

At this program, interactions with infants typically begin with an invitation from the teacher. Usually it is a verbal offer accompanied by outstretched open hands, palms facing up. After this initial overture, the teacher waits for a reply. The response time varies from child to child and depends on the situation. Whenever a teacher provides an invitation, nothing progresses until the child agrees. An example of this sequence of invitation, pause, response, and then engagement is the diaper changing observation that opened this article.

## Infants need unhurried time that is reflective of their own pace for learning and exploration.

Consider the basic human rights of being asked, being heard, and having control over your physical well-being. Now imagine someone physically lifting or interfering with you in any way without your consent. If you are not consulted, you experience powerlessness. You might feel more like an object than a human being with individual opinions, freedoms, and rights.

## Unhurried time

Infants need unhurried time that is reflective of their own pace for learning and exploration. To provide unhurried time, teachers have to commit to slowing down and being emotionally present with infants (Kovach & Da Ros-Voseles 2008). In the following example, the teacher is patient and deliberate as she interacts with infants.

Ms. Tui approaches 6-month-old Max; she has just warmed his bottle and is observing him. Seeing cues that he needs to cool down, she gently touches his tummy to check his temperature and then removes his jersey. During this slow process she talks to him about what she is doing and how she is moving his body. She also sees and says that he looks tired and may be ready for a nap. Ms. Tui takes Max and the bottle to the sleeping room. She cuddles Max as she feeds him his bottle.

Max stops drinking to look at the mobile above them, and Ms. Tui waits patiently until he wants his bottle back. When he stops a second time, she tries feeding him again, but Max moves his head indicating he has had enough. "Okay, shall we put you to bed then?" Ms. Tui asks.

She puts Max into his crib and strokes his head. Max plays with her free hand as Ms. Tui hums along with the music that is playing. Soon, Max starts making little snuffling sleepy noises. His eyes close and Ms. Tui stays with him a while longer, continuing to rub his head.

When she is sure Max is asleep, Ms. Tui gently lifts her hand, secures the side of the crib, and moves away. She sits listening to 9-month-old Ben, another infant in the room. Ben has been making soft noises. He heard Ms. Tui humming for Max but hasn't seen her. Ben holds his hands out, indicating that he needs Ms. Tui. She picks him up and suggests they change his diaper.

This observation shows Ms. Tui's commitment to moderating her pace and providing valuable, uninterrupted time and attention to each infant. While I cannot say for sure, it seemed as though Ben patiently waited for his turn with Ms. Tui because he trusted that she would attend to him just as carefully as she had Max.

To help family members connect more deeply with the importance of respecting their infants, the teachers at this center offered a unique workshop. As one mother explained it, she and her husband had to feed each other and respond to the experience.

During the role-play, I was the child and my husband was the parent. We role-played a scenario in which the child was being rushed by the adult. My husband fed me yogurt and talked on his cell phone at the same time. He did not give me enough time to swallow before offering more yogurt. By the end of the activity I was covered in yogurt and really angry, but I learned a great lesson about following children's lead. It's important to pay attention so you know when they are ready and how long they might need to swallow. Also, I was annoyed about him talking on the cell phone instead of paying attention to me.

Another aspect of unhurried time is the teachers' conscious decision to move slowly in the infant room.

On several occasions I observed teachers moving softly, with small, quiet, fluid movements—as though they did not want to disturb anything. Their intention is to reinforce the idea that this is the children’s space and teachers do not want to interrupt that slow, peaceful environment.

Taking adequate time deepens teachers’ awareness and knowledge of each child, gleaned by the child’s behavior, body language, and expressions. When teachers give their time, they show how much they value the person with whom they are engaged. Each person has an individual rhythm and pace. Respectful practice involves stepping out of one’s own rhythm and pace and adjusting to that of the infant.

## Offering choices

Giving children choices is critical to respecting their individuality. As the center director said,

It is important to offer choices to children—especially infants because they don’t have a lot of choices. Offering choices for anything that involves them gives children power. They can see and feel how powerful they are when they make decisions that directly affect their well-being.

It is important to talk to infants about what is going to happen next and give them the opportunity to respond and be a willing participant. When given choices, infants soon get the idea that their opinions are valued.

Because it can be difficult to offer infants genuine choices, the center uses meals as an authentic opportunity every day. To begin, each child decides when to eat. Teachers offer mealtime visually and verbally; if the child does not accept, the teachers put the food away and offer again later. Once an infant expresses a desire to eat, teachers give the child a choice of what color bib to wear. This choice, offered prior to every meal, became a sequenced routine for the children (and a great opportunity to begin learning about attributes—a precursor to mathematical thinking; see the article by Julia Luckenbillon on page 26 of this issue).

After the infant decides on a bib, the teacher puts the bib on him, signaling (and saying) that a meal is coming

next. Across several observations, I noticed that the action of choosing a bib aided children’s ability to wait for a turn to eat. It was a cue to the child: “Once my bib is on, I will have my meal soon.” Finally, infants are given food choices. In collaboration with teachers and families, a cook at the center supports teachers in respecting children’s individual tastes.

Unhurried time was the key to offering choices. Teachers allowed time for the children to respond (which often takes longer than expected in adult time), and then reacted according to the children’s wishes. In the long run, this time was well spent: “When educators trust children to make choices concerning their daily events and activities, they not only create a sense of autonomy, but also an environment of respect” (Brumbaugh 2008, 175).





Teachers developed a shared understanding of what it is to be respectful.

## Supporting rather than intervening

The teachers all felt strongly that support rather than intervention demonstrated respect for the infants. They believed that adults generally try to do too much for children (intervening in their learning), and this can have a damaging effect on the children's perception of themselves as confident and competent learners. Support, on the other hand, is when a teacher, fully present and available, chooses to observe without becoming overly involved in doing things for the child. The following are comments from the two infant teachers.

Our infants are exposed to an environment where they are respected for who they are; their *wairua* [Māori for *spirit*] is nurtured, honored, and celebrated. Our program encourages babies to feel secure and safe to make independent choices in all areas of their learning and development. I believe this gives them a positive and healthy self-image and, ultimately and optimistically, a healthy world view.

I think respecting children's confidence and competence provides them with the *mana* [Māori for a concept similar to self-esteem] that comes from working through feelings and emotions. When infants have the time and support to work through feelings like frustration, they learn to self-regulate, collect themselves, and focus. They also learn to trust and feel emotionally secure enough to seek help if they need an extra hand from someone else. Knowing when to lend that hand is really important. Children are capable of so much more than people often give them credit for. (Ms. Tui interview)

[We believe in] giving children freedom and encouraging them to become confident explorers. We are there to support, but not interfere, as they figure things out—like how to use their own bodies to get to where they want to go in their own time. (Ms. Huia interview)

This idea echoes the concept of “a baby's sacred quest for competence” (Brownlee 2009, 4) and reinforces why trusting children—waiting and watching—is far more beneficial than rushing in to the “rescue.”

## Respecting the whole team

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While the teachers demonstrated respect for children, they also made sure to respect each other—they even worked collaboratively to develop a shared understanding of what it is to be respectful. This understanding was detailed in a team contract, a document the teachers developed together by brainstorming what they each felt was important. Everything in the contract was agreed to by all the teachers (a total of five infant and toddler teachers). Most importantly, the team members felt ownership of the ideas because they each contributed to the process.

## Conclusion

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Respect involves intentional caring in which the teacher displaces her own ideas and motivations to truly understand the needs and wishes of the child. Teachers can demonstrate respect for infants by doing the following:

- › Recognize that infants need to develop a strong and reciprocal relationship with at least one other person in the environment and have a low enough child-to-teacher ratio to address that need.
- › Invite infants to engage and then wait for their approval, asking again later if necessary.
- › Interpret children's intentions by carefully and peacefully observing, paying close attention to body language, cues, and gestures.
- › Recognize that infants may prefer an unhurried approach to their individual care routines, learning, and development, and adapt to their pace.
- › Offer infants choices about what is going to happen to them, and wait for their response.
- › Support infants in their learning and be available, but resist the urge to intervene unnecessarily.
- › Recognize the need to deeply respect children, families, and the whole teaching team.

The teachers I studied have a vision about how their center should feel and what kinds of experiences

await infants and toddlers who attend. The most important part of realizing this vision is that every member of the teaching team shares it. Teachers trust children to be confident and competent learners—and they trust each other to communicate effectively and demonstrate respect.

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