

Building Bridges: How Infant-Child Classes Can Help Support Families

by Donna Stusser

Attention is powerful when it comes to parenting. The following story—a vignette from a parent-child class for babies at the Summerfield Waldorf School in Santa Rosa, California—illustrates the beauty and power of paying attention.

Our parent-child groups consist of up to six families—mothers, fathers and their babies ranging in age from three to seven months. The babies develop quite dramatically over the course of the few months we meet. They change from quietly cooing on blankets to noticing one another. Some of the older babies soon crawl across the room to seek out a toy held by another. They almost always enter the classroom with a big smile on their faces and quickly get down to the business of playing with the toys and exploring their surroundings.

One of the goals of my work in teaching these classes is to provide an atmosphere that supports infants in discovering the magic and joy of being in a physical body on their own. In time they master basic movement patterns and learn to feel confident moving around on the floor with ease and flexibility.

Quiet attention

A key component of the class is observation time. These times for careful observation are inspired by the work of infant educator Magda Gerber, founder of RIE (Resources for Infant Educators), who was, in turn, inspired by the Hungarian pediatrician Emmi Pikler. Many of Rudolf Steiner's indications for the healthy, unhampered development of babies mesh gracefully with the Gerber/Pikler approach.

Children love to feel the quiet attention of their parents. During observation time we try not to chat but, rather, to focus on what we see. For example, if a baby has rolled over, we notice how his hands are placed in front of him, how after a few minutes his fingers unfold from a fist to raying out. We notice what his eyes might be looking at, and how every so often he tucks his chin in towards his chest. The same baby, on his back now, might reach for his toes and pull on his sock. We see so much as we observe, and also notice how easily we miss a movement progression in one baby while focusing on another. This process of observation is much like a muscle we work with each week.

During observation time, the babies are free to move on their own. Therefore, it is helpful if they begin from a position they can move in and out of freely. For instance, if a baby has only rolled over onto her tummy once, then she would be placed on her back at the start of the observation time. Similarly, if a child has not yet mastered getting into and out of the sitting position, we begin where the child is most comfortable independently.

Ely's story

When a new session started up that included continuing families and new arrivals, I suggested to a new couple, Jina and Tom, that when they felt ready they could allow their baby boy to lie on a blanket next to them. They willingly gave it a try, but Ely was not so comfortable on the floor. My heart reached out to him in his frustration; I had seen this situation before. Ely arched his back, squished up his face and protested with a squawk of distress. “Up!” he was saying to his parents through his baby language.

Jina commented that Ely didn’t like to be on his back. I hoped that over the next few weeks I could gently guide the parents toward helping their son discover the magic that can happen for a baby on the floor.

I suggested to the parents that they try small doses of back lying when Ely was well-rested and happy. I encouraged them to lie right down there next to him, to play with him in bed, and to allow him to lie on their bodies. I also encouraged them not to prop Ely in a seated position, since this too-early taste of uprightness was keeping him from enjoying his rightful time in a prone position.

During week two, excitement filled the air as we settled into class. I asked all of the parents to reintroduce themselves and their children. Jina, Tom and Ely were last in the circle of five families to speak, and during the series of introductions, Ely lay happily on the floor, squealing joyfully. Jina described to the group what a week it had been! She and Tom told us that Ely had been in the Intensive Care Unit after his birth, and during this time they had learned infant massage. They now decided to incorporate infant massage into Ely’s floor time. Tom, who was temporarily off work, recovering from knee surgery, found that the floor was the most comfortable place to be—so both father and child would have their “floor time” together. When Ely would begin to express his discomfort, Tom would apply a gentle massage technique, such as joint compression or simple holding. I believe that the deep witnessing by his father that Ely experienced during these times helped the child sink more comfortably into his body.

Ely changed dramatically over the weeks. He no longer had such a strong need to be “entertained.” He quickly moved through movement patterns on the floor. He rolled from back to front, and then began to push up on the floor with his toes and feet so that he was doing, in essence, the “downward facing dog” yogic pose. Every time I observed him, he appeared busy and occupied with a new discovery. We were all so delighted, especially Ely. He was discovering the joy of movement and how to use his body to further his discoveries. He was the initiator and the master of his movement, and his determination and mastery increased along with his obvious delight in himself.

From entertainment to self-mastery

Ely’s story is unusual in some respects, due to the struggles of his early days. Because of a compromised respiratory system, he received a monthly visit from a nurse after he was able to go

home from the hospital. During the visits, the nurse suggested to Jina that she try to get Ely to move more. They would then roll him back and forth in a blanket, stretch out his arms in front of him when prone, and place him in positions he couldn't get into himself. As a result, Ely's playtime evolved into a time in which others played with him and tried to get him to move in ways he didn't especially want to. Ely was unhappy both lying on his back and on his tummy. As time went on, Ely's parents placed him in a walker-like piece of baby equipment (but without wheels) in which he could sit upright and play with toys. He liked this position, and Jina received encouragement from the nurse to continue to sit him up, although he was not yet ready to do so by himself. Once he got a taste of the world from that perspective, he would scream even louder when placed on the floor. His well-meaning parents concluded that he "just didn't like it," and Ely spent many hours in his favorite contraption.

Looking at Ely's situation, we see that from his earliest days what could have been quiet playtime, exploring the possibilities for movement and discovery, became an exercise in externally defined, goal-oriented contortions and manipulations. This lack of quiet playtime also meant that the parents never received a much-needed break from the direct care of their new baby—a baby who had experienced a rough start. Each parent felt that there was something they should be *doing* to help him along, and the nurse corroborated this outlook.

Then they found their way to an infant class in which they could witness other babies exploring at their own pace and in their own time. This inspired them to aid Ely in becoming more comfortable in his body—which, ironically, meant returning him to the dreaded back-lying position. But this return allowed him to go back and move in a sequence that was natural for him, allowing him to master essential back-lying movements before progressing further. By observing both Ely and other infants, Jina and Tom gained the confidence to allow Ely to have this experience and remained committed to letting him discover how to move on his own.

Jina beautifully expresses her realization about how healing floor time can be: "[Ely's] movements became his own. He began to have reasons to move. In retrospect, I now realize that I should have waited for him to be comfortable and never have moved his arms or helped him roll. There is no way I will be moving him to learn his movements again. It creates a kind of splintered learning with no other purpose but to succeed in a task at hand that has no meaning for him."

This family's story is unique in that the time it took Ely to grow comfortable in his movements on the floor was greatly reduced due to the extra healing touch of his father and the particular dedication of both parents to support their son. Nonetheless, in ten years of engaging in this work with infants, I have witnessed other families who faced similar challenges and who grew to see their children's struggles in a new light.

Filling the well

Parents everywhere want their children to be happy and content, and often are willing to jump through hoops to make this happen. At the same time, parents want some moments to themselves to get things done or to replenish themselves so that they can continue giving to their children. This is one of the main reasons why parents who thought they would never use the television as a "plug-in-babysitter" succumb to placing their children in front of the set. "I will be such a better parent if I get some time to myself," they say, or, "It is just so that I can get this place cleaned up."

But if we assist our children, from the earliest ages, in discovering self-directed play and entertainment, both parent and child can “fill the well” so that they can be both together and apart more joyfully. While it is valuable for parents and their children to share pleasurable moments together, I don’t feel it is the parents’ responsibility to entertain their baby. Rather, it is our responsibility to provide the environment in which infants can safely and contentedly learn. This brings us back to observation.

A little bit of letting go

Taking the time to give our attention to our children builds a bond in a different way than does holding and touch—although cuddling is, of course, wonderful and essential, too. But if the baby feels seen and appreciated, she can then feel content to be on her own for a time. For a newborn, this might be ten minutes twice a day with the parent close by. An active nine-month-old baby may be able to play for half an hour three times a day in a safe space while the parent cooks a meal or does some floor stretches of her own.

Babies can feel when we observe them without an agenda, simply open with our interest and attention. They need a measure of this kind of quiet, connected attention in order to happily become absorbed in their own explorations later on. Witnessing our children’s glorious moments of discovery, as well as their frustrated struggles, aids us in seeing them as growing individuals. A bridge of connection between parent and child is built through direct contact, close observation and a little bit of letting go.



Author’s note: When my first child was six months old, I received a visit from Birthe Kaarsholm, an old friend from my years in Sacramento who had studied Goethean Science and the fine art of observing phenomena in the natural world, and who later deepened her studies to encompass a lifelong passion for movement. Birthe introduced me to the concept of allowing babies to move on their own as freely and naturally as possible, and of closely observing this process. She also introduced me to the work of Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber, the movement work of Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, and to Body-Mind Centering. A window into my future opened up. I am eternally grateful to Birthe for helping me to see the possibilities for integrated movement in babies. We continue to study together the phenomenon of how all movement affects babies—how we move around them, how we move them, and how they move.

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