Resources for Infant Educarers 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 Educarers (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 Observations™ 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*
References:


