

Anticipation & Participation whakareri, whakauru

By Guida Lawrence

This article was inspired by an experience one afternoon as I picked up a baby to take her for a nappy change.

Following RIE and Pikler principles, we always support an infant's head and back by placing our arm and hand underneath as we lift, and then carry them in the lying position until we place them down again.

On this afternoon I told the infant what I was about to do, then put my hand and forearm under her back as usual. I observed her response – she smiled, but her neck and shoulders tightened with the shoulders hunching forward, her torso became still, and there was a slight stiffness through her whole body. So I remained still, and said to her “You can relax your body, I will lift you, you don't need to do anything.” She relaxed, the tightening released, her body became more free, and then I lifted her up.

The experience set me thinking about what infants ‘do’ when being picked up – how they are beginning to organize themselves in response to this external stimulus. When we observe babies' development, it tends to be the outer movements we see. But the internal responses come before the outer, and are probably less obvious.

This baby was anticipating the lift and believed or felt she had to lift herself, and the tightening was a means to support her own head. I noticed that she responded the same way on following occasions. So I continued with my instructions each time I lifted her, giving her the time to participate in the lifting activity in a new way – and she did.

Soon she was remaining relaxed every time she was lifted. She no longer created excessive tension to lift her own heavy head.

“Children have a much slower tempo than we do. Their thought patterns are forming, and they need time to process information in order to respond to us. Slow down with your baby and you will be helping her immensely.”

Magda Gerber

Being able to anticipate what is about to happen and preparing yourself to be involved is a lifelong skill. In applying the RIE principles at TLC we do this with infants in the way described above. When we carry babies from one space to another, say into the nappy change room, or out of the sleep room, we offer them the opportunity to anticipate and participate. We may pause on the threshold so that they have a chance to look around at the new space before entering, and even looking back at the space they have just left. When they enter a room where there are other babies or toddlers, we pause so that they can observe the others – in just the same way an adult may take a moment to take it all in.

When the baby participates – perhaps by gazing intently or by smiling or moving their body – we acknowledge this to them.

Back to the picking up process when a baby has begun to roll on their side or onto their tummy is a good time to include this in lifting them into your arms. Free movement principles mean that all babies get into sitting or crawling by rolling from their back to their tummy – they don't sit straight up forwards! So gently rolling their upper body to the side while supporting their back as you begin the lift is the best way of participating in what your baby will be wanting to do for themselves.

Magda Gerber

Predictability Helps
“As your baby learns to anticipate the next event in her daily routine, many conflicts will be minimised for her. She will need to spend less energy adjusting to new or changing situations and will have more energy to explore.”

