

# The Uniqueness of Infancy Demands a Responsive Approach to Care

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Infants have a built-in plan for how they will learn. They start to pursue their course work even in the womb and, when born, are ready, interested, and actively engaged in study. For those who are asked to develop curricula and lesson plans for infants, it would be a great mistake to do too much planning without paying close attention to the infant's built-in curriculum.

## DEVELOPMENT IS A CONTINUOUS PROCESS

through which a child gradually grows and changes. But as early childhood professionals we need to keep in mind that each developmental period has its own challenges and opportunities. As brain development research has reached the general public, most of us have become aware of the infant period as an important time when neural pathways that influence learning and development are formed.

The rapid development of the brain during the early years does not mean that infancy is the most important period in life. Each period is important. Although optimum attention to infants' development

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helps them become resilient, it is not an inoculation against negative experience in subsequent periods. Infancy, however, is distinctly important. It is a unique period that calls for unique responses from adults.

The ways infants think, feel, and function differ significantly from the ways of children and adults in other periods of life.

The developmental periods of preschool, middle childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and aging are unique as well. Each period of life has its special challenges, issues, and developmental milestones, calling for different responses, attention, and care.

This article focuses on children in the first two years of life. It points out the unique aspects of this period, and makes recommendations

for the ways infants need to be approached and treated. We propose that infants should be treated differently from preschoolers and older children with regard to approaches to readiness for school, guidance and discipline, selection of curriculum content, the learning milieu, and the relationship of teachers to children.

In this article we use the terms *genetic programming* and *genetic wiring* to indicate that infants follow common developmental paths and have strong inborn drives to learn and develop. Experience plays a necessary and important role, but infants follow these common developmental paths even though their early experiences vary greatly. We use the term *infant care teacher* to recognize that in infant care settings, the adult simultaneously teaches and cares for the child.

The term *caregiver* refers to all adults who are in a caring relationship with infants, regardless of the setting.

## The unique make-up of infants

There are four main areas in which infants and toddlers differ from older children.

### 1. The intensity of infants' inborn inclination to learn and develop in particular areas

All humans are internally driven to learn and develop, but this internal drive functions in slightly different ways and degrees at different points in life. Where content of learning is concerned, infants' internal drives are much more specific than those of older children.

Babies have their own learning agenda. For example, infants and toddlers are genetically programmed to learn language, to become more skillful in their small muscle and large muscle functioning, to construct knowledge about the functioning of people and things in the world around them, to seek out significant relationships through which they can be nurtured and protected, and to use relationships to learn appropriate and inappropriate ways of relating to others. Infants actively pursue and engage in learning in these content areas. Selma Fraiberg says, with regard to an infant's inclination to master learning language, "It's a little bit like having God on our side" (Fraiberg, Shapiro, & Chernes 1980, 56).

Adults who want to help infants and toddlers learn need to understand this learning agenda and find ways to

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facilitate and build on it rather than supplant it. The need to motivate infants' interest in learning is fundamentally different from the need to motivate older children. For example, the impulse to master algebra or ice skating or reading is not necessarily present in an older child's developmental trajectory. Interest in these topics comes from group socialization and an introduction by adults, coupled with the more generalized genetic programming to learn that all humans have.

For the older child, selecting and presenting topics for mastery as well as motivating the child to pursue mastery in those areas are appropriate actions to be taken by teachers and other helping adults and peers. Without this introduction the child may not become aware of the pleasure and usefulness of certain content. But for the

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infant, there is no need for adults to present specific topics for mastery or to provide the motivation to learn.

Babies are perfectly motivated to seek out the skills and relationships that will help them survive and prosper. They have been genetically wired to do so. In a video about her infant/toddler care approach, Magda Gerber wisely proclaims, "Nobody knows better about what a baby needs than that baby" (1988). Without special attention and adaptations to the uniqueness of infants' inborn curriculum, the curriculum clarity of the infant would be missed, and mastery motivation already in place would simply be thwarted or ignored. For an adult to usurp this decision-making process is inappropriate. The adult role in infants' learning is facilitative, not directive. It is only as the child grows and topics of learning are less genetically programmed that the adult role comes to involve more guided activities and instruction. As school readiness, language and literacy development, and numeracy initiatives move downward toward infancy, it is important to discourage generalizing pedagogical practices with older children for use with infants.

### 2. The holistic nature of infant learning

The second unique aspect of the infancy period is the holistic way in which infants learn. Infants take in information continuously, naturally, and fluidly. They pick up from their actions, interactions, and observations all kinds of information through which they build knowledge and skills in all areas of development. One interaction can teach many things. They make no distinctions between physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and language lessons. Lessons in all domains are processed almost simultaneously and each interaction is mined for all its information, not just that which is intended or focused on by those with whom infants interact.

Because infants learn in this holistic way, adults need to take a more organic approach to infant learning than with learning by older children. Structuring lessons for 15 to 20 minutes on a particular content area—for example, language or shapes—will almost always result in the adult missing the larger learning experience in which the infant is perpetually engaged. The infant receives information

from every domain simultaneously no matter which one we may wish to emphasize. Thus plans to help with infant learning are best created in ways that reflect this awareness.

A teacher may think that crafting a special lesson on seriation or colors will result in specific learning, but infants don't segregate their lessons into topic areas. Unless the teacher has considered all the potentials for learning in the interaction, the lesson learned may wind up being nothing to do with colors. Instead, learning will center on a part of the interaction that is more important to the infant whose focus at the time may be the texture of the materials used to display color, the emotional tone in the interaction, or perception of the style adults use to introduce something new to someone.

In high school it is appropriate for teenagers to focus narrowly on solving a problem in algebra class and put other messages coming into their heads on the back burner, so to speak. For the infant, narrow focusing is an impossible task. Even with the best of intentions, this is misguided pedagogy. Babies follow their natural inclination to process everything about what is in front of them and never focus narrowly unless compelled.

### 3. Infants' rapid move through three major developmental stages in their first two years

During the first six to eight months of life, most infants focus their attention and behavior on developing a sense of security. On the larger stage of seeking security, nurturance, and protection, infants play out their explorations of the world around them and a growing knowledge of themselves as individuals with separate identities.

As they grow toward seven months of age, infants turn their attention to exploring through movement, manipulation, and visual inspection. Although still needing and seeking security, they do so through the lens of exploration. No longer do they constantly seek to be given to or held or immediately gratified by their trusted caregiver.

Captivated by the exciting world out in front of them, they now want to move out into and manipulate the world. Infants see themselves as active explorers, no longer physically bound to the trusted adult but on their own for brief periods. They seem to be practicing independence, motivated by a powerful urge to explore but still quite dependent on the trusted adult being there when needed. The seven-month-old looks to the infant

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care teacher to validate his explorative bursts by showing confidence in his developing competence and providing security on new terms.

During this new exploratory stage, adults need to make a switch in how they care for the infant and alter the ways they provide security and relate to the child's growing sense of self. If children in this stage of infancy enjoy a safe, secure environment, are allowed to use the caregiver as a base of security from which they can journey back and forth for emotional refueling, and see their caregivers providing eye contact, they prosper. When caregivers simply continue relating to the children as if they remained in the first developmental stage, children learn that their natural urge to explore is seen as problematic and think that those who care for them don't believe in their developing sense of competence.

As children move to the third stage of infancy—starting around 16 months of age—their focus changes again. For the rest of their infancy, they seem to be consumed by issues of *me* and *mine*, notions of *good* and *not so good*, and distinctions of self from other. Their need for security and their drive to explore are subsumed under an almost consuming preoccupation with the pursuit of a definition of self. Interactions and negotiations with others lead to learning about themselves as independent, dependent, and interdependent beings. Sixteen-month-old infants explore not only the environment around them but also their power to choose how, what, and when they explore. At this stage they frequently resist the suggestions of those who provided their security when a choice is involved. They start to get a clearer understanding about distinctions between self and other, begin to feel the power of self to both choose and resist, and then at the end of the stage move toward learning early lessons about taking responsibility for their actions.

Here again the adult must make a switch in relating to the child. Providing security becomes an issue of setting boundaries to help children learn the rules of social behavior while letting each child know the adult is still there for him or her when boundaries are breached.

This rapid movement of the infant through three significant developmental stages and the need for the adult to be responsive to developmental shifts and the bumpy transitions between stages makes the work of the infant care teacher challenging. Just when a teacher seems to be

getting things right with regard to a child, the child's major orientation shifts and the teacher is called on to adjust.

Curriculum planning, implementation, and supportive materials should not only anticipate developmental stages but also allow for individual variations in learning styles and temperaments. These elements need to be broad enough in scope to respond to all developmental domains simultaneously. Infancy's uniqueness, once again, needs to be considered.

#### 4. Development of a first sense of self

In contrast to preschoolers and school-age children, infants are developing a first sense of self during their first two years. How they are treated and what they are allowed and expected to do and not to do are incorporated into the infant's developing self. Three-year-olds can take a stand, resist eating food they don't like, judge someone as mean or unfair. Infants can't. Instead, they take in the ways they are treated as examples of how things are, thinking, "This is the way people express emotions," "These are the things people get yelled at for," "These are the ways to approach people," and "This is how my inborn curiosity is accepted."

Children build a first sense of self through their interactions: "I am a person who is liked, encouraged, given choices, protected, listened to, or I am not." Infants pick up their definition of self by perceiving how they are treated by those who care for them. This distinction between the infant, in the process of developing a first sense of self, and the older child, acting from a newly formed sense of self, has many implications for care.

Infant care teachers must understand that they are taking part in the creation of a baby's first sense of self, that they are molding and shaping the way babies see themselves. The baby is innocent, trusting, and unguarded and takes in as the necessary information to build a sense of self the messages from those giving her care. Thus, the infant care teacher's job carries with it a great degree of responsibility in influencing the way the child defines *self*. Creating a warm, caring, subjective relationship with the infant is more than nice; it signifi-

cantly contributes to a child's positive sense of self. As noted Reggio Emilia pedagogist Carlina Rinaldi (2006) describes, "Learning and loving are not so separate as we once thought."

#### Implications for infant care teachers

These four areas of uniqueness—genetic wiring, holistic learning, rapidly changing developmental perspectives, and development of a child's first sense of self—make the infancy period different from all other age periods. This uniqueness makes it incumbent upon adults who care for infants to treat them differently from older children. Because the infant is genetically programmed for specific learning, the role of the adult in supporting learning is one of respect for and responsiveness to the child's lessons rather than generating lessons for the child. Because early learning is holistic, plans to facilitate infants' learning need to be holistic. Because security, exploration, and identity formation manifest themselves differently during the infancy period, the way adults respond to these needs must fit with the child's developmental stage.

Infants are just becoming aware of themselves as individuals and are unable to pick, choose, and judge the appropriateness of messages they receive from others. Adults need to be particularly sensitive to their role in the infant's shaping of self, respectful of the uniqueness of infancy, and responsive to infants' particular way of functioning.

#### What is and isn't responsive care?

In general, infant care practice in the United States reflects a picture of curriculum extremes. One approach often used suggests that very young children only need safe environments and tender, loving care, and that specific attention to learning is inappropriate. Another common approach suggests that for infants to grow and develop cognitively they must be stimulated intellectually by adult-developed and -directed lessons and activities, carefully preplanned and then programmed into an infant's day. Both views fall short of meeting the needs of infants.

Loving care is an important base for learning but only half of what is needed. Adult-generated lessons violate the child's learning expectations. Most learning theorists and cognitive specialists affirm that infant interest needs to

### Active Partnerships

From all that early childhood educators know about how children learn best, we recognize that infants must have a hand in selecting what they learn. The infant should be an active partner in selecting curriculum content. The curriculum should be dynamic enough to flow and change daily based on the infant's changing interests and needs. In this way, curriculum is responsive to and respectful of what infants bring to and want from these early learning experiences.

play a significant role in guiding teachers' selection of learning experiences, materials, and content (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). Therefore, curriculum plans should focus not on games, tasks, and activities, but on ways to best create a social, emotional, and intellectual climate that supports child-initiated learning and imitation and builds and sustains positive relationships among adults and children. For example, in the area of language learning, spontaneously and responsively talking with infants is more effective in producing rich language than planning and sequencing language lessons (Hart & Risley 1995).

Attention to children's interests, curiosity, and motivation is the place to begin curriculum planning. Then the environment must be seen as a crucial part of the curriculum, provoking interest and encouraging and supporting infants' learning agendas. And the stage for a responsive curriculum must be set by establishing program policies that create a climate for learning.

### Planning the responsive curriculum

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Curricula and lesson plans for infants must center on their needs and interests and guide the development of environments, selection of materials, and supportive interaction styles that are responsive to infants' needs and interests. Plans should engender respect for the competencies that infants bring to each interaction and reflect children's need for relationship-based experiences.

Responsive curriculum planning focuses on finding strategies to help infant care teachers search for, support, and keep alive children's internal motivation to learn and spontaneous explorations of people and things that are naturally of interest and important to them. Planning to work responsively with infants can begin with the study of the specific infant children in care. Each child's unique thoughts, feelings, needs, and interests are a significant part of the equation in developing plans. Records of each child's interests and skills should be kept to guide adults in creating the role they will take in each child's learning.

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Adaptation and change are an expected and critical part of the planning process. Once an interaction with a child or small group of children begins, an infant care teacher is ready to adapt his or her plans and actions to meet the momentary and long-term needs and interests of each child. Good plans always include a number of alternative strategies and approaches. Lesson plans, appropriately developed, include strategies to broaden infant care teachers' understanding of and deepen their relationship with each child served. In addition, plans specify content and materials. Good plans (1) reflect activities that orient the caregiver to the role of facilitator of learning rather than the role of teacher and (2) assist the infant care teacher in reading the cues each infant projects.

### Conclusion

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In a responsive curriculum a good portion of the work has to do with infant care teachers preparing themselves and the environment so that infants can learn, not figuring out what to teach infants. Then, program planning involves exploring ways to help infant care teachers attune themselves to each infant they serve and learn from the individual infant what he or she needs, thinks, and feels. Regardless of what daily plans look like, positive learning relies on a curriculum and lesson planning that includes

- attending to the development of a safe and interesting place for learning;
- selecting appropriate materials for meeting the individual needs and interests of the children served;
- organizing learning and care in small groups;
- developing management policies that maximize children's sense of security in care and continuity of connection with their caregivers;
- building ways to optimize program connections with children's families; and
- grounding caregivers in the cognitive, social, and emotional experiences in which infants and toddlers are naturally interested.

As we construct programs, let's keep the infant foremost in our minds. Let's ensure that our first goal is meeting infant needs for intimate, nurturing relationships

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through which a child can have safe, interesting experiences. Carlina Rinaldi's words remind us that "infants and toddlers should be the primary focus of reference for constructing services" (1991). If we let these words be our guide, we will help facilitate the development of motivated, powerful, competent, emotionally healthy, and intellectually curious children.

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