

The Challenges of Infant/Toddler Care

by Enid Elliot with the staff at Options Daycare, Victoria, BC

Infant/toddler care encompasses much more than the babies. There are layers of relationship in this work as children come with a web of connections - parents, grandparents, and others. Connecting with a baby usually means relating to many of these people. Childcare staff also develop relationships with each other in order to work in a team. All these layers of connections can have competing pulls.

Each relationship has its own unique quality which unfolds over a period of time. Building these connections can not be rushed. Caregivers must pay careful attention to what each relationship calls forth and to the tempo each demands. This is responsive care, being responsive to each person while remaining in touch with one's self.

Being self aware, responding sensitively to the baby and parent, working harmoniously together with staff takes skill and thought. These different relationships mean remaining open to the others' points of view while at the same time establishing a sense of trust. This can create tensions. Manning reminds us, "We shouldn't forget that our primary responsibility is to care for. If this means that we are often unsure about just what to do, then we must live with this uncertainty. Discovering what to do requires that we listen carefully to the ones cared for. (Manning, 1992, p. 53)"

Early in September in a school-based program for young mothers Jessie arrives with two month old Sarah wrapped up tightly in a blanket with a bottle propped just so to allow a steady drip of formula. Jem, Sarah's caregiver, notes the propped bottle and wonders if she knows Jessie well enough to discuss another way of feeding Sarah.

It is early in the year and she has only known Jessie for two weeks. Experience has taught her that change in parenting happens when a young mom feels safe and supported - that the caregiver is on her side. Sometimes a relationship happens quickly and Jem can bring up difficult issues after the initial couple of weeks. But her connection with Jessie is still new and she decides it is not time to test it.

She welcomes Jessie and comments on how nice and warm Sarah looks. As Jessie hands Sarah to Jem she complains that she did not get much

sleep last night. Jem remarks to Sarah, "Your mom is tired this morning. Let's give her a break, as she works hard to take care of you."

There will be time in the following weeks to find out more about Jessie and Sarah. What will be the most important issues to address with Jessie? What is the best way to talk to her about them? What do Sarah and her mom each need in order to thrive?

Working in relationship means that we stay alive to its complexities and intricacies. These different connections can create difficulties or dilemmas which defy simple solutions. That is the challenge!

Manning, R. (1992). Just caring. In E. B. Cole & S. Coultrap-McQuin (Eds.), Explorations in feminist ethics, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Enid Elliot is a doctoral student at the University of Victoria focusing on infants and toddlers and their caregivers. Presently she is working with Pacific Rim Early Childhood Institute as an instructor.

Caregiving and So Much More . . .

Enid Elliot

We were having a hard time with eighteen month old Jim. He arrived each morning and started emptying shelves and throwing toys. Once he had emptied the shelves he turned his attention to the smaller toddlers and began to push them over. As our oldest toddler, he was also the biggest and a push from him could send some of the slighter babies flying.

Jim was a sturdy boy and he had been in our program for over a year. We had seen him grow from a round smiling infant to a big toddler, comfortable with us and our environment. His mother, Danielle, was very shy and we had taken a year to establish a relationship with her. For the first few months, she had said almost nothing to any of us; after awhile she started hanging around more and chatting. She was in a somewhat unsettled and, at times, volatile relationship.

These types of relationships and toddlers don't always mix. We knew that things at home were difficult for Jim, as his strivings for independence ran

headlong into the young couple's need for his compliance. Their skills in coping with his energy and with his increasing sense of self were minimal.

We tried our usual tactics of engaging him in an activity as he arrived in the morning, anticipating his assaults on the younger children and intervening, but we were not making much headway. Jim talked very little and, of course, a toddler does not have the concepts, let alone the words, needed to explain what is bothering him.

As adults, when we are upset, we need to have someone present for us who is trying to understand the confusions and dilemmas that life presents. As J.A. Kottler says in his book *on being a therapist*, "This healing relationship between people goes beyond mere catharsis: human beings have an intense craving, often unfulfilled, to be understood by someone else." (p. 8) Toddlers want to be understood, too. We decided to pay attention and to be present to what Jim wanted to tell us about his life.

When Jim arrived, his caregiver, Martha, met him at the door and took him to a small room where there were a few toys and pillows. The other caregivers managed the rest of the children as Martha took time to be with Jim and "listen" to what he had to tell her. It was a "therapy" session without the words, but with an attitude of attention on Martha's part. Being present for another can happen on many levels. Jim could empty shelves, throw pillows and stomp around the room without endangering the other children. After half an hour or so, Jim returned to the group ready to join in.

What Kottler goes on to say is true of work with infants. "Intimacy means being open, unguarded, and close to another. To facilitate trust, the therapist must feel comfortable facing intimacy without fear. This closeness helps the client to feel understood and appreciated; it teaches him that true intimacy is indeed possible, that a relationship based on regard and respect is desirable." (p.44) Martha was able to accept the feelings that Jim expressed through his body and be ready for him when he needed finally to connect and be reassured.

Kottler, Jeffery A., 1993. *on being a therapist*. San Francisco, Jossey Bass)

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