



“... AN EDUCATOR FOR OVER FIFTY
YEARS”: REFLECTING ON MY PRACTICE
WITH INFANTS AND TODDLERS
ENID ELLIOT, PH.D.

“An Educator for Over Fifty Years...”

Reflecting on my Practice with Infants and Toddlers

Enid Elliot, Ph.D.

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Prologue

This keynote talk by Dr. Enid Elliot was presented at a conference she collaboratively organized, *Reflecting on our Practice with Babies and Toddlers*, held at Camosun College in Victoria BC on 11 May 2024.

Enid notes her gratitude to the the First Peoples of this territory, and grateful to the land, water and air which holds us in place

She also wants to thank Morgan Myers, Jeanne Puritch, Saza Rose, Tatiane Silva and Maire Walker, who were all part of the conference committee and volunteered their time to hustle up door prizes, pin down rooms and check off names.

Narissee Christensen was Enid's right-hand person throughout this whole project. Heather Kay as always offered the right advice at the right time. Thanks also to Nigel, Narisse's husband, and Enid's husband Rick, who helped with the AV issues... and thanks to Rick for creating this pdf of the talk.

Just a note here--Enid will use educators and caregivers interchangeably... she believes that you can't educate without care and you can't care without educating.

My name is Enid Elliot and I have been an educator for over fifty years.

You might wonder, why I am giving this talk this morning?

I decided that I wanted the opportunity to think about the past fifty years of working with young children, much of it with babies and toddlers. Since I was the main organizer of this conference, along with a splendid team, I decided to spend time thinking about the past fifty years.

I have learned a great deal along the way; looking back, I did not know much at the beginning despite getting a MA early on. I've worked with children in different settings, helped set up child care centres, organized and took workshops, taught students, and struggled to create a practice that made me feel happy at the end of the day.

If I found myself saying no to children or people all day I ended up feeling like the wicked witch of the west! I found that when I was outside with two year olds as they played with water, they were happy and so was I. If I listened to them and responded positively to each child, they were then happy to trust me and be my friend.

I found that fundamentally care, love, joy is at the heart of this work. But love, joy and care: what does this mean? These are complex concepts and are difficult to explain. Yet articulating what we do is crucial when we want to describe the complexity of our work to others. Articulating what we do

helps us deepen our own thinking so that we can discuss our ideas with others and create a common philosophy and vision.

Sometimes people say to me “well, here we all have our own philosophy and that's OK, we get along”–which is very nice and tolerant but if you work as a team I think you need to share both a philosophy of ECE and a vision of a just and peaceful world, as well as continually discuss how your philosophy is enacted. How will you achieve your vision in reality? For instance, if you tell children that they can't take the truck away from another child it means that you can't take truck away either; no solving struggles because you are bigger and can say “if you can't share I am going to put it away and no one will play with it”. That kind of action solves the problem, but then what do children learn?–they learn you are bigger, stronger and can control things!

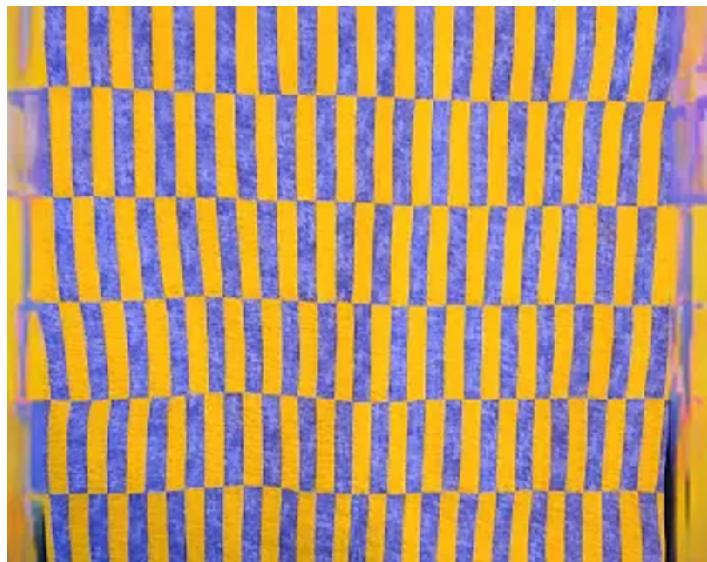
Quilting a Practice

A couple of years ago while attending an early childhood conference, I noticed that the nearby art gallery had a quilt show from Gee's Bend, a rural and very poor area of Alabama. I had heard about these quilts made by women in Gee's Bend (<https://www.soulsgrowndep.org/gees-bend-quiltmakers>), and I had been longing to see them. Mary Lee Bendolph, a quilter from Gee's Bend said a woman made “quilts as fast as she could so her family wouldn't freeze and she made them as beautiful as she could so her heart wouldn't break”.

I went through the art gallery carefully, reading labels and feasting my eyes on the form and colour of the quilts. The richness, the vibrancy, and the surprise of the quilts amazed my eyes, prodded my thinking and touched my heart. Quilts made from scraps of old clothes carry the history and energy of the folks who wore them; even in an art gallery, this can be felt. Quilter Mary Lee Bendolph said, “Old clothes carry something with them. You can feel the presence of the person who used to wear them. It has a spirit in them. Even if I don't know the person, I know someone wore those pants, and it feels lovely and warm to me”.

If old clothes carry the spirit of the wearer, surely we are in touch with children's spirits as we care for them.

Seeing the quilts and reading about the making of quilts connected back to the conference I was attending and the work of early childhood educators. The beauty and the love of a quilt made by hand, the communal nature of the actual quilting process, and the improvisation of the Gee's Bend quilts was a visual reminder of aspects of practice as an early childhood educator.



Quilt from Gees Bend

Quilting, like caring for children, has traditionally been women's work. Practical, useful and beautiful, our lives are enriched and sustained by such work. But the work of caring is often unseen, invisible and misunderstood. Just as quilts are not always "seen" for the beauty and pleasure they provide, the love and care of young children is not appreciated for its utility and splendour. Caring for children takes improvisation, imaginatively working with the material at hand. In the hands of experience, with an imaginative eye to beauty, something spectacular can happen. We too need to find or re-find at times the beauty of our practice so that *our* hearts don't break, and we need to articulate that beauty and joy.

Caring and Balance

Caring for babies is complex work. Just as a baby must find balance as they learn to walk and climb, we too look for balance; balancing the individual with the group, balancing our attention, balancing parental needs with caregiver needs with children's needs, balancing the needs of several babies. Lots of balancing.

"...a constantly changing system of countervailing, compensatory reactions."

To Henri Wallon, balance is "...a constantly changing system of countervailing, compensatory reactions, which seem to perpetually form and shape the organism depending on the relations between the physical forces of the external environment and the objectives of the movement."

Balance is complicated. We are constantly being acted upon by outside forces and must keep ourselves focused and upright. As an illustration, stand up and shut your eyes. Do you feel the weight shifting as you maintain your balance? Gravity pulls you down, keeps you on the earth, and you must shift and work the little muscles in your feet to keep you upright. There is a tension to standing upright.

Staying alert to the nuances in our practice, we too must shift and re-focus to keep good balance.

A pioneer of attachment theory, D. W. Winnicott wrote "There is no such thing as a baby; there is a baby and someone". Babies come ready to enter into a relationship and into the human dialogue which, as Selma Fraiberg wrote, "begins with an exchange of gestures between parent and infant". A baby quickly learns the communication style and language of the people around her and soon she adds her gestures, words and expressions to the growing conversation. Over time these dialogues will grow in complexity and depth.

Calmness, Connection, Consistency and Commitment

A one year old enters our programs looking to connect with someone. They are looking for a relationship in which to feel safe and secure. I hope

that we can bring consistency along with calmness to that baby's question. By listening, being responsive and consistent, we begin to build trusting relationships. When you feel listened to, you feel a connection; when you are listened to, you are more likely to turn to that person again and the relationship grows.

In one centre where I worked, we were having a hard time with eighteen month-old Jim. For weeks, he had 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 in our program. His mother, Danielle, was very shy and we had taken almost a year to establish a relationship with her.

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 to cope with his energy were minimal. They sometimes locked him in a room when they could no longer cope. When he arrived in the morning, we tried our usual tactics of engaging him in an activity we knew he liked. We tried anticipating his assaults on the younger children, intervening and reminding him to be gentle, but we were not making much headway. He 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, we find it useful to have someone present when we are trying to understand the confusions and dilemmas that life presents. Toddlers want to be understood, too. We decided to pay close attention to Jim's commentary on his life, and to find the space and time to listen.

We made a plan.

When Jim next arrived, his consistent 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. She described what she saw him doing and wondered how he was feeling. It was a "therapy" session without a great deal of words, but with an attitude of attention on Martha's part. Listening happens on many levels and is felt by both participants. Jim expressed himself to someone he trusted and he felt heard. After fifteen minutes or so, Jim would return to the group calmer and ready to join in. This process continued for about two weeks until Jim seemed more relaxed on arrival and no longer needed a container for his anger and frustration.

By being aware of our own stories of relationship, which means knowing our own ghosts and angels that have coloured our experiences, we can be calm, we can call on our own self-awareness to help us stay centred. As we stay centred and calm, we allow the child's unsettled energy to find a place to settle. Just as Martha could be a container for Jim's confusion and anger by calmly listening to his frustrations, we can listen to a toddler's fears, frustrations and joys and

understand what they are struggling with, and allow our calmness to soothe their anxiety. It takes deep listening to understand a toddler's frustration or worries. Our own commitment to calmness and connection keeps us willing to listen and search for an answer. It is easier to remain calm with a toddler's frustration, anger or aggression when we understand and remember our own frustrations, fears and angers; we must not allow a toddler's tears to trigger ours.

“...listening is an art...it needs the full and real presence of people to each other. It is indeed one of the highest forms of hospitality” Henri Nouwen

One way to have consistency, calmness and commitment is to have a primary care system, or a key person, but I would suggest we call it a consistent person who commits to all the children but has three or four she or he follows more closely, while also connecting more closely with those parents. This person welcomes the child and their parent, grandparent or auntie and is their consistent connection to the program, especially in the beginning. The consistent person keeps track of how the child is growing, the concerns of the parent, and how the child is faring within the group.

To be welcomed, to feel that your presence is acknowledged, is special and can begin any relationship on the right foot. For example, when you go to a party and someone welcomes you, introduces you, makes sure you are comfortable and gets you a cup of tea, you begin to relax. When programs ensure that a caregiver has three or four children that she consistently diapers or feeds or helps to sleep, those children can relax confident that they can continue their conversation with a familiar person.

A consistent care system can be seen as a commitment to developing an in-depth dialogue with a family and their baby. Twenty or maybe thirty years ago, I decided I needed to return to school and try to get a deeper understanding of the emotional work of caregivers engaged with babies and toddlers. I wanted to articulate the work that

we do in ways people could appreciate; that it is more than babysitting. I also had started to work with a wonderful team who were willing to talk about philosophy, ideas and practice. We began a system of primary caregiving, not sure if it would work; however, it did and I decided to talk to other educators who worked with babies.

I interviewed caregivers who practiced this type of care, and found that they embraced it and appreciated the deeper connection they could have. I sometimes wonder if this commitment to an individual child can arouse fears in staff who worry there will be a baby they might not like, or that the child will get “too attached” to them, or that it will be too difficult for other staff if a child’s main caregiver at the centre is away. To invite someone to join you in a dialogue, to listen and to be heard, makes you vulnerable within that encounter. We come to care about the babies that we care for and we become vulnerable. Through becoming vulnerable, we can open to our own ghosts and fears, and that vulnerability can be an opportunity for growth.

As the baby-caregiver dialogue deepens and each starts to learn the other’s language, babies can become attached to caregivers other than their parents or family and so the caregivers can and do become attached to them.



Slow Infant/Toddler Care

Since we work in a team, we can insure that the other members of the team are known to the child because they may have to take on caregiving tasks for us. Working in harmony with our co-workers creates a peaceful environment. To work coherently and peacefully, philosophies and visions must be similar and communication with teammates clear.



CittaSlow (Slow City) logo

Slowing down can help us communicate better. Taking the time to share your ideas, your thinking ...slowing down as we help children, as we move through the day... there is no need to rush. My son, who is a paramedic, told me they try not to run to an emergency situation because, he said, that increases the anxiety of everyone, while slowing down provides time to think.

Gee's Bend quilter Mary Ann Pettaway said "Doing a quilt, it's no hurrying thing."

What are we rushing for? I have been thinking we could join the slow city and slow food movements... slow infant/toddler care.

As we slow down, we can change diapers thoughtfully and with care and have a conversation with a child. We can take time to put on a coat and ask what did they have for breakfast or share what we had.

Being touched, being changed, is deeply personal. Just imagine—it is only those closest to us that we sleep with or we undress in front of. We learn how the baby's body feels and what their cry means, or how they go to sleep or how they say good bye. Focusing on three or four babies, we come to know them in depth; and they know us in return. Of course, we know the other children as well but with these three or four, we have deeper understandings.

How we touch a child also gives them a message about their body. If the caregiver approaches

diapering as an opportunity to pleasurable connect one-on-one with a child while collaborating on a shared task, the message from the caregiver is that the child is a person worth spending time with. As the main person to diaper a child, we can have a conversation that might continue from the morning or the day before; and a baby experiences being known. We are, all of us, bodies and know what it is like to have our body neglected or treated poorly. The doctor who does not explain what they are doing; the person who says this won't hurt and it does; the person who rushes you into your coat; these situations can leave us feeling insecure and anxious.

This work of caring for small beings is intimate work.

Respecting children's bodies means taking time to explain what we are going to do, how we are going to do it, asking if we can pick them up and respecting their answer if they say no. Asking to pick up a child and waiting for permission, asking if their diaper needs changing, asking if you can check if they say no, asking which shirt they want to wear, do they want to put on their boots or shall I help them, are all acts of respect. And through these acts, the child can begin to understand that they have a right to say no. Better, I think, to teach this now than to teach when they are teenagers.

When we collaborate with a child we tell them what we are going to do; I want to change your diaper. I am going to take off the wet one or poopy one and clean your bottom. If they are a toddler, they can be asked will they lie down or stand to be changed?

Which diaper do they want? Can we adjust our pace to their pace? Can we wait for them to choose which diaper or shirt or pants they want? Can we



do this activity together, both of us paying attention? Can we slow down if we need to? Can we change our plan to fit in with the child's desire; can they adjust to what we need? Think of all a child is learning in this interchange; so many lessons for learning to cooperate with others.

And speaking of helping...

Why not help children rather than push them to do something themselves? Helping a child can be a time to be one on one with that child, helping with boots or coats or putting on a hat, having a quick personal check in with them. Don't we want a world where people help each other? We can model helping. We are all interdependent. Why this insistence that a small two and a half year old (even a four year old) put on their big puffy jacket because "we know you can do it"? or put on their big rubber boots by themselves? Why this rush to make the child independent? There are many times I am grateful for someone's help. Sometimes, we need to know that we are not alone in our struggles. Certainly there is pride in doing something yourself, but very little when you have been forced to do it. Most four year olds will not still be asking for help at ten.

Saying Yes

Along the lines of helping I have been thinking about something a New Zealand educator told me; she said "we try to be a 'yes' program" What a good idea; so lovely to be told yes instead of no.

Yes, we can do that, but first we will need to do this; or yes, you can swing that stick if you take it outside; or to a parent, yes, we can make sure he keeps his jacket on but I worry when he gets red in the face and says he is hot. There are many ways to say yes and invite children and parents into the conversation. When we say yes we feel more positive and more helpful, which impacts us and makes us feel like we are the good guy!

Moving bodies

And we can say yes to children's bodies and the need to move by allowing for free movement and

providing opportunities and space for walking, running, jumping, climbing, stretching and hiding.

There is no need to strap a toddler in a stroller; he can walk, maybe not in a straight line, but I used to take a group of toddlers around the block when I worked in New York City. We took a long time, but it was their walk not mine.

Emmi Pikler, who you will hear about more today I feel sure, was a huge supporter of free movement as well as respecting the enormous capacities of babies and toddlers. Pikler felt that children needed to move their bodies without restrictions and they needed opportunities to challenge their movements, test them out. They did not need to be put in bumble seats or propped up with pillows. They will sit when those movements and muscles are there; meanwhile, they have other movements to explore. We can provide space for their bodies and opportunities to climb. We should provide opportunities for babies



and toddlers to crawl and squeeze and reach and stretch and roll and squat and leap; our bodies can do so much and children want to discover all their bodies can do. But if they don't have opportunities to learn about how to move their bodies, they will be ignorant of the all the possibilities of movement that might be on offer.

I fear that we often limit children's bodies and their movements. Children's ability to move as they grow older depends on their understanding of their body from the beginning. While balance is important at age 65, but you have to begin

developing that skill at one! A public health doctor told me the health of a 65 year old depends on her health at five.

Programs of beauty, peace and joy

I think we can create programs of beauty, peace and joy that celebrate children and their desire to grow, learn and move. We can create practices that respect children, provide consistency, calmness and meaningful connections. And then when we hit difficult places, we must problem-solve, be creative and find a positive way.

We can not just hammer on square pegs to fit into round holes; that damages both the peg and the hole.

This morning I hope you will listen, think and find words that work for you,-that describes your best practice. How do you envision a good caring place for young children? We are asking you to think about your practice and where do you hear words, ideas, phrases that resonate with your vision for your practice. All of us can advocate for beautiful practice, peaceful practice.

Look around at the people who you will be thinking with today. Each of you has stories of the baby who challenged your image of infants, or a story of a family that took compassion and imagination to understand, or a co-worker who challenged your perception of yourself. You also

have children that have stayed in your heart over the years or months

There is a great deal of care, knowledge and skill in this room. Listen to the presenters, listen to each other and listen to your heart.

Thank you.



About the Author

Enid Elliot has been involved in early childhood education for 50 years. Enid has been a valued teacher, mentor and friend for many caregivers in and around Victoria BC, where she has lived since 1978. She is an Instructor in the Early Care and Learning program at Camosun College.

Some of her publications include:

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