

EXCERPTS FROM KEYNOTE SPEECH AT THE 1995 RIE CONFERENCE **Magda Gerber***

When I visit day care centers, the children are very seldom given total freedom. Now, what are the prerequisites for us to give them freedom? First, we have to give them a totally safe environment. Then, we have to become very good observers of infants. How do you become a good observer? You take an imaginary bowl, you take the thoughts out of your head, you put them in the bowl and say, "You stay here, I will put you back in my head later." You empty your head from worries. When we are with children, we should try to empty our minds of other, extraneous thoughts and only be aware of what's happening to the children. Then we can learn a great deal.

Then there's something called discipline or consistency or "clearly defined limits." It's amazing how quickly very young children learn that if Mommy's at home, we *can* do this or we *can't* do that, but if Daddy's at home, it may be the other way around. In every child care center, the children know with whom they can go how far. That's a most important thing to learn—it's called "social learning."

Observe more, do less. The more we do, the busier we are, the less we really pay attention. Paying attention is very difficult to do. Some professional people can do it. Some inventors can do it. Einstein could do it. Some people can let go of all the other issues that wander through their minds and really pay attention. For caregivers, this is your goal.

These are the prerequisites for giving children total freedom:

- a totally safe environment,
- adults who know how to observe children and really pay attention, and
- adults who know how to be consistent and how to establish clearly defined limits and expectations.

[Understanding Aggression]

Is there any human being who lives without aggression? What is aggression? Aggression is hard to define, but it has something to do with frustration and anger. If everything goes wonderfully, very few people become aggressive. When do you feel most aggressive? Perhaps when you are threatened or fearful. A threat brings about anxiety in us. For instance, in the middle of the night, if somebody phones and says, "I will come and choke you," you become fearful. Some people become aggressive when they are misunderstood. Is there any human being who has never

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felt misunderstood? I don't think so. Children, especially, very often feel misunderstood and are misunderstood.

So, how can we try to *understand* rather than misunderstand? What should we do? The answer is, observe more, do less. That's really the greatest message. If everyone did that, we could all go home right now. In our society, we're trained to do, do, do. And if you don't, you *pretend* to do, do, do. You must act as if you are very busy, because being busy is virtuous. Not doing anything is considered laziness and that's not highly appreciated.

Nobody talks about being observant. And yet, everybody would gain a great deal if we did less and observed more, especially [if we observed] children. They don't speak our language yet, but they give us many, many signs. I cannot tell you how many times I have seen people who have *their* idea of what needs to be done and ignore the child's needs. I once observed a woman feeding a child. The child threw up. Ignoring his obvious discomfort, she proceeded to re-feed him, saying, "There's nothing in your stomach now, so I need to feed you again."

Sometimes we listen to our own logic (which is not always the most logical logic) rather than listen to the other person. If we could stop assuming that other people are stupid or bad, but rather try to understand them, there would be no more wars. If we could say, "You believe in this and I don't, but I respect your beliefs," people would live in peace. And we certainly should try to do that with infants. Then there would be less frustration, less anger, less fear, less anxiety, and less aggression in this world.

[Experimental Interactions]

What do you do about children who hit or push not out of frustration, but in a sort of experimental way, seemingly just to see how the other children will respond?

How do we become civilized human beings? Why don't we go around hitting, screaming, and doing all sorts of other unpleasant things? How do we learn to live in a society? That's really what you are saying. How do we resolve conflict situations? That's what all of us have to learn to handle, from birth to death. There is no life without conflict, no day, not even an hour. Some conflicts are smaller, some are bigger. There are some people who get angry whenever things don't go their way. There are people who are angry *all* the time, but anger does not help to resolve the situation. To have the feeling that when something happens, I will learn, I will find out how to handle it, that's called a positive attitude. Few people have it. I hope everyone in *this* room has it. Some

people come totally unglued if the world doesn't function their way. Well, the world never functions our way. It's a big world out there.

How can we influence the little world which is *our* world, in our jobs, in our family? How do families function? Very poorly, with rare exception, because everybody thinks with their own thinking and in their own way. It's very difficult to be flexible and to understand another point of view. Somebody once said that the family is the most untherapeutic environment, but that it's good for children to grow up in families because then the rest of life seems easy in comparison. Many people actually feel that way. Why is that? Basically, families really like each other, but it's very hard for them to live together because it's important. The more important something is, the harder it is to live with. Within the family, every little thing is important. A child brings home a note from the teacher complaining that he didn't pay attention during class and the mother feels that it's her fault because two years earlier the child asked for something and she didn't give it to him. Guilt is part of family life, and no matter how you try to live without it, guilt is always around. So how can we do the best possible job? What is the best job? It is to be able to actually listen. Even if children say the most absurd thing, you never say, "That's stupid." Don't do that, never.

The best answer is, "Aha," "Oho," "Hm-m." Ideas, thoughts, should always be accepted.

Everybody around you wants to mold you. Most people are very opinionated and most people have trouble accepting us for who we are. How can we raise our children to accept differences? Do we give them the freedom to see the world through different glasses? One way is that desires and thoughts should always be accepted. Accept the other person's reality.

So, how can we raise the next generation in the best possible way? What is life? A series of problems. If you are not a problem solver, you cannot survive. Every day you have to figure out how to do what is best. You make mistakes and, hopefully, you learn from your mistakes. How to be a good problem solver is really the issue. Now, can that be taught? I believe so. You can ask a person, "Well, what else could you have done?"

For instance, a child comes home and says he hit a child and the other child hit him back. The mother says, "How could you do such an awful thing?" If you say that, the child will not tell you the next time he hits someone. So instead, you might say, "Um-hm." "Did you enjoy what happened?" Obviously, the child will say no. "What else could you have done?" "What will you do when it happens next time?" In this way, the child begins to learn to solve his own problems. So, you need to be a very good listener and not be judgmental. Is that easy? No, it's very difficult,

because obviously we want them to be the best and do everything the right way. But, to accept other ways and allow children to experiment might be the right way.

Many years ago, I read an article entitled “The Joys and Sorrows of Parenthood,” which I thought was very well written. It summarized trends in child rearing this way:

1910s—spank them,

1920s—deprive them,

1930s—ignore them,

1940s—reason with them,

1950s—love them,

1960s—spank them lovingly. That’s the time when parents would say, “It hurts me more than it hurts you.” To me, that was the worst. All the other things I can accept better, but when someone hits a child and says, “It hurts me more than it hurts you,” my answer would be, “Then don’t do it.”

1970s—the hell with them,

1980s—let’s not have them.

What do we say in the 1990s? “Let’s try again”? “Listen to them”? “Let’s send them to day care”? “Let’s respect them”? What does it mean to “respect” them? Don’t abuse them? You know, it’s not only physical abuse; there’s also an enormous amount of mental abuse going on. When a child needs something and we don’t pay attention, to a degree, that’s abuse. That we could spend a whole day talking about: how not to abuse children.

How many of you are training people to be with children? What can you do? How can you prepare people? “See what happens” is a wonderful way of thinking. So many times we find out we don’t need to intervene because things resolve themselves if we wait and see what happens.

Why is it the world’s most difficult profession to be a parent? For one thing, it’s forever. You think it’s only with young children. But I can tell you, I have grown-up grandchildren, and after a phone call, when they tell me something, I have learned not to say anything, but boy, do I feel! It’s forever, and it’s so terribly important. Other things we do or we don’t do, it’s not as important as being a parent. Also, it’s the most guilt-producing occupation. Whenever something doesn’t go perfectly, we remember that three years ago, when the children needed us the most, we went to the opera house instead.

So, how can we help the world and train good Educarers? By treating people the way you want them to treat the baby. Is it easy? No!

It's easier to say the words than to consistently treat people with respect. Is it important to keep trying? Yes!

[Infant Learning]

The term “cognitively challenging” means something quite different for infants than it does for adults. Even if children are in the same room day after day, they will continue to discover new things. The less novelty we expose them to, the more they will discover. Thirty or so years ago, the key word when you discussed infants was “novelty.” You had to have something new all the time, a new thing hanging from the crib, a new curtain. People would buy all sorts of crazy things to provide novelty for their children. The true novelty happens because the children change. Even if they look at exactly the same thing day after day, they will discover something new because their cognitive development allows them to see what they never saw before.

And then comes one of the most important issues, “emotionally nurturing.” I think we could spend a whole day describing what that means. It could mean someone listening to you so you don't feel alone, so you can connect with somebody. Many people pretend to listen. You can pay lots of money to somebody for them to listen to you for 50 minutes. You know, Freud had a wonderful invention—the person never saw the therapist, who sat out of the patient's line of vision. There used to be a joke that one day, a therapist turned on a tape recorder in his office and snuck out during the therapy session and went down to the coffee shop. Much to his surprise and embarrassment, his patient walked into the coffee shop a few minutes later. “Don't worry,” the patient said, “my tape recorder's talking to your tape recorder.”

What makes an encounter therapeutic? Do you really have to go through psychoanalysis and many years of therapy? When do you feel refueled and well when you talk to a person? What is the prerequisite? I think it's when somebody *really* listens. You can very easily pretend to listen with “Mm-hm,” “Yes,” “Okay,” “I hear you.” When someone says, “I hear you,” it means they're not there. That is only an echo.

But if somebody really pays attention and tries to understand, it's therapeutic. Nobody understands another person totally, except perhaps identical twins. Most people have different ways of thinking, and everybody relies on their own experiences. The only thing we can do is to try to experience things from the other person's point of view. It's almost impossible, but we should never give up trying to do this.

There are all sorts of therapies. Carl Rogers invented a type of echoing therapy where the therapist basically echoed what the patient

said or responded “Um-hm.” Other therapists always sounded angry, always challenged their patients, always letting the patients know how stupid they were. So, we return to our question, “What is therapeutic?” When do you feel at ease with another person? I really think if you feel that the person not only pretends to listen, but really tries to understand, it is helpful. We can only try to understand. Nobody really understands another person, but we can at least pay actual attention.

Now, to get back to children, how does this translate for them? I think it means, let them play and don’t interrupt. I used to visit many families and centers. I saw some medium-good ones, some not-so-good ones. What I rarely saw was children playing without interruption. It almost felt that caregivers, who usually didn’t pay much attention to the children, suddenly realized they were being paid, so then they would go and say, “Oh, good girl! You built a nice tower!” And you know what happens—the child stops building the tower. The comment, rather than making a connection, interrupts play.

When I came to the United States, child care did not include infants. I would ask, “Where are all the children?” People would reply, “All parents raise their children,” and they would look at me as if I must come from some kind of backward country to ask such a stupid question. I said to myself, “What a fantastic country! In other countries, you have good parents, medium parents, and lousy parents, but here it seems everybody is a wonderful parent.” I liked believing that. Then, one day, somebody invited me to MacLaren Hall. It’s a place where you find children who have no parents, neither wonderful nor lousy. The children are placed there temporarily, but I met a social worker who told me that “temporarily” can sometimes last several years, while the children wait to be adopted or placed with a foster family. So, it turned out that in the United States, as elsewhere, not everybody is a wonderful parent. The reality and the dream are not quite the same.

When I say “freedom to explore and interact with other infants,” that’s a very big issue. That means we have to do our job. We all talk about “safe environment.” Safe, meaning safe if no adult supervises or is in the room. The less we interrupt, the more easily children develop a long attention span. According to many books, babies don’t have any attention span, but it’s not quite true. If they are well cared for, if they can do what they happen to be interested in at that time, and if nobody interrupts, they have a much longer attention span than we give them credit for.

Another important issue is when and how we care for infants. Many grown-ups don’t pay attention when they care. For many years, people referred to me as “the diapering lady.” Diapering is very important. How often do you think a baby gets diapered? Six or seven thousand times. Why

don't we do it nicely? Why don't we make it a learning experience? Why don't we want a child to enjoy being diapered? I don't mean to say that working with a diaper full of feces is a happy situation, but we shouldn't forget that we are not only doing the cleaning, we are intimately together with the child. That means we should give them all the time and all the attention and then let them be free.