



What's the Rush?

Slowing Down our 'Hurried' Approach to Infant and Toddler Development

by Tina Bonnett

Sleep all night.
Off the breast.
No more bottle.
Use your words.
Share your toys.
Don't cry.
You don't need up.
Thumb out of your mouth.
Bye-bye blanket.
— and the list goes on.

What high expectations we place on our infants and toddlers who are just beginning to understand this great big world and all of its complexities! In an attempt to ensure that growth and learning occur, the fundamental needs of our infants and toddlers are often pushed aside as we rush the young child to achieve the *next* developmental milestone. As parents and educators, we frequently feel pressured to prepare the infant for toddlerhood and the toddler for the preschool years. Unfortunately, in doing so, we miss celebrating with the child the beauty and wonder of the present moment.



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Caregiving approach, a Certificate in Infant Mental Health from York University, and instructor training in the Roots of Empathy Program. Tina previously worked in the Healthy Babies, Healthy Children Program at the Mary J. Wright Laboratory Preschool at the University of Western Ontario. She is passionate about the infant and toddler years and advocates for a slower paced approach that incorporates developmentally appropriate practice.

Our 'Hurried' Approach

Newborn infants typically enter the world with an innate ability to communicate their needs. Whether hungry, in need of a diaper change, stimulation or a cuddle, infants cry to communicate their needs to nurturing adults who trust these communications and respond accordingly. So what happens so shortly after the newborn period when so many of us stop trusting the child's natural progression of development? Why do we attempt to accelerate growth at a pace that is not led by the infant or toddler? David Elkind, in his progressive book *The Hurried Child*, explores the concept that "as a society we have come to imagine that it is good for young people to mature rapidly" (2007, p. 3). Elkind conclusively links physical and mental stress and the ability of the child to engage in meaningful play to adults' 'hurried' approach. This quickened pace of development is now experienced not only by the preschool and school-aged child, but also by the infant or toddler who is subjected to developmentally inappropriate expectations. Sadly, both human interactions and play — the two most powerful media of learning — are neglected as we urge the young child to prematurely prepare for the adult world.

While the purpose of this article is not to examine the social pressures that lead

parents and early childhood professionals to this 'rushing of development,' it is imperative to be mindful that one of the most significant reasons this occurs is worry that the child will fall behind and the competence of one's parenting or educating will come into question. No parent or educator wants to take a chance on disadvantaging a young child; but, surprisingly, this push to 'advantage' children often has the effect of disadvantaging them.

Letting Babies be Babies and Toddlers be Toddlers

Respecting the basic need to suck. One of the most basic and fundamental needs in infancy and toddlerhood is oral stimulation. The infant is born with his or her brain hardwired to seek the breast and to suck. The breast, bottle, soother, and thumb are all means used to meet developmental needs during the oral period of development, which can typically last until the child is at least 2 years of age. Too often we rush this process by weaning the child from the breast or bottle, by taking away the soother and discouraging use of the thumb. Many adults fear that language or dental health will be negatively impacted by sucking and mouthing objects or fingers. If we, as adults, are striving to support regulatory behav-

iours, then the basic need to suck should be respected and accommodated.

- Sucking not only provides a means to gain nourishment, but also helps to regulate and soothe the young child.
- Sucking is a natural reflex that is needed not only to sustain life, but also to aid the infant or toddler as he or she learns to regulate feelings and behaviours in the first few years of life. Achieving a balance between ensuring proper dental health and language development *and* meeting sucking needs should be the ultimate goal.

Society's pressure on the mother to wean the infant or toddler from the breast should be especially disregarded as the Canadian and American Pediatric Societies and the World Health Organization advocate "for breastfeeding to continue up to 2 years and beyond" (Canadian Pediatric Society, American Pediatric Society, World Health Organization).

Transitional items as a means to reduce stress and self-regulate. Transitional objects or comfort items, which are often associated with feelings of closeness and security, meet another core infant and toddler need that additionally appears to be hurried, often before cues of readiness, are expressed. Ranging from a blanket, to a soother, to an article of a parent's clothing, to a toy, comfort items are often initially promoted and viewed as 'cute,' but then are quickly discouraged, typically once the infant is mobile. How ironic this is considering that most often children enter into care outside of their home around this time and are typically in need of strategies to work through separation and adapt to their new surroundings and caregivers. In today's commercialized society where toys are in such abundance and are viewed as disposable, should we not encourage children if they develop an attachment to something that has a purposeful meaning? An attachment to a comfort item can:

- Ease transition.
- Help soothe during times of stress or fatigue.
- Assist the young child to regulate and calm themselves.

If transitional objects provide a sense of security for the child, thus regulating stress hormones, then perhaps we should reconsider their role in relation to the young child's development.

Following the child's lead in toilet learning. Another significant developmental milestone that marks the emergence of a more fine tuned sense of body awareness and functions is toilet learning. Many adults pressure children to make the transition from diapers to the potty before the child is both physically and cognitively equipped. Cues to look for in young children include:

- The child expressing discomfort when a diaper is in need of a change.
- The use of language related to bodily functions.
- Recognition of a full bladder or need to have a bowel movement.

Often these are not present before the adult decides that it is time for the child to master the use of the toilet. Since toilet learning is one of the first control issues that may arise between a child and adult, it is imperative that it is led by the child. Engaging the young child in power struggles regarding the use of potty learning is not only detrimental to the child's developing autonomy and sense of self, but also to the typically natural occurring decision of the child to use the potty. Most professionals, like Reynolds (1990), advocate that, "Until the age of three, toilet learning should be left entirely up to the child with no pressure or recrimination" (p. 95). Setting up both the emotional and physical environments for exploration of this life skill is a far more responsive and effective approach than hurrying the child before he or she indicates both cognitive and physical cues of readiness.

Valuing both academic *and* social-emotional intelligence. Academics are highly valued in today's world. As adults we are all aware of the connection between learning and success later in life. In years past, academic expectations were typically reserved for the school-aged years; and children less than four years of age were often free to learn about their world through undirected exploration and play. In today's quickened pace, however, developmentally inappropriate expectations are being increasingly forced on our infants and toddlers as we attempt to create the next baby genius.

Our focus has shifted from relationships and play — the two most meaningful modes in which the young child learns — to preparing our children intellectually for later academic challenges and the adult work world. Bombarded with baby learn-to-read programs, computerized software, and battery-operated toys, our infants and toddlers are too often expected to learn skills that are neither functional nor developmentally appropriate in the early years. Research conducted by David Elkind (2007) strongly suggests that, "Forcing a child to read early can be a devastating experience for a young person who is not intellectually prepared for the task" (p. 39), and "What is crucial to beginning to read is the child's attachment to an adult who spends time reading to or with the child" (p. 38).

This is not to suggest that we move away from striving to create literacy-rich environments. It is imperative that we continue to support emerging language, literacy, and cognitive skills by saturating the young child's environment with print, books, writing materials, and other cognitive-based activities. Play and interactions should, however, be the vehicles through which the world is explored if our ultimate goal is to create environments that provide opportunities for the infant and toddler to develop both academic *and* social-emotional intelligence.

Strategies to Slow Down Our Own 'Hurried' Approach

- **Adopt a continuum approach:** When considering both child development and curriculum, strive to support each unique child as she masters predictable skills at different rates in accordance to culture, family, and community.
- **Reframe age groupings:** Broadening our view of the infant/toddler as up to at least 3 years of age ensures that the child is presented with developmentally appropriate expectations.
- **Practice primary caregiving and continuity of care:** Establishing solid, long-term relationships provides a foundation for security and creates a more attuned connection between the child and educator. This results in increased awareness of each child's *individualized* and *current* developmental needs.
- **Create a responsive environment:** Ensuring that our programs are breast-, bottle-, soother-, and comfort item-friendly is paramount. Cues that suggest a child wishes to be cuddled or held should be responded to consistently and sensitively.
- **Offer a balanced routine:** Obtaining equilibrium between stimulating and quiet times, as well as group and individualized times, will help to avoid overstimulation. A flexible and even-paced routine can provide a balance for children who lead busy and stressful lives.
- **Document children's development and seek early intervention services:** Being keenly aware of each child's interests, strengths, and abilities helps to ensure that developmental lags are not missed and that early intervention strategies are implemented with a preventative approach in mind.

- **Value human interactions and play as the foundation for learning in the early years:** Relationships and play are the two most influential factors that contribute to learning and therefore should be at the heart of all interactions and curriculum planning.

Fostering Interdependence with Our Infants and Toddlers

Obtaining a balance between autonomy and dependence is often a challenge in the quickened pace of today's world. As humans, we are born biologically wired to rely on nurturing and responsive adults to meet our needs and to provide us with a secure base from which we can explore. From the moment of birth we are social creatures who seek, and typically find, gratification in human interactions and relationships. It is our *interdependence*, rather than our independence, that initially ensures that our basic needs are met, and later leads us to have rich, productive, and satisfying lives. Collaboration with others and the ability to work and play, not only independently but also within the context of a team, are life skills that are often founded in early childhood and set the trajectory for happiness and success later in life. By responsively supporting young children as they *gradually* move towards a more autonomous self, we are creating an interactive, people-oriented, and self-confident future generation.

Celebrating Infancy and Toddlerhood

If as adults we can learn to trust the natural blossoming of each child, while at the same time ensuring that the skills in each developmental domain are being met, then each child's nature will be nurtured and learning will be optimized. Slowing down our 'hurried' pace will offer our infants and toddlers the opportunity to experience childhood to its fullest and will also allow both

the child *and* adult to celebrate the joy of the journey.

References and Resources

American Pediatric Society:
www.aap.org

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