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Learn to respect your baby

By Patricia Carswell

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Respect. It's something that you might accord to gang members, your elders and betters and perhaps even Aretha Franklin. But to a baby? Yet respect is the cornerstone of a parenting philosophy that has been embraced by a growing number of Hollywood celebrities, including Felicity Huffman, Tobey Maguire, Helen Hunt and Jamie Lee Curtis.

RIE - Resources for Infant Educators - (pronounced "wry") was founded in 1978 by a Hungarian baby specialist, the late Magda Gerber, together with Tom Forrest, a paediatric neurologist. Since then it has been quietly followed, mostly in California, by small groups of parents meeting in parent-infant guidance classes. So it might have stayed but for its adoption by the Hollywood ruling classes, and its introduction last month in 1,700 state-funded education programmes across the US.

The language that RIE is couched in is certainly modern enough to appeal to the glitterati. Its adherents talk of respecting, honouring and empathising with a child - words that might have old-school parenting experts spluttering into their tea. Headline-writers have also fixed on its more unusual precepts: roughhousing and tickling a young baby are discouraged, as are stimulating distractions such as mobiles and baby gyms.

Yet behind all the Californian jargon and the media hype is a charmingly old-fashioned approach to childrearing that reminds me of the way my late grandmother looked after me, and which was starkly at odds with my own frenetic style of parenting.

"Would you not just leave the child alone?" Granny would chide, as I waved another educational toy in front of my son, dashed him off to a music class or rushed to pick him up at the first murmur. "That's a tired cry," she would add, glancing out at the garden in the hope that I might just let my busy infant lie outside in the pram, gazing up at the trees.

I thought my grandmother was out of date and out of touch, but the people at RIE would have applauded her. RIE is all about stepping back and giving your baby a chance to develop at her own pace rather than constantly bothering her with stimulating programmes and educational toys. It's about spending uninterrupted time watching, listening and learning her cues, without darting off to check your Twitter feed or pushing her on to the next developmental stage. And for an overstretched parent like me, it's rather beguiling.

Deborah Solomon discovered RIE when her son - now 12 - was a baby. She has since gone on to become the executive director of the RIE organisation.

"I discovered that I'd really been working overtime with my son, to the point where I was missing out," she says. "I was working so hard to take care of him that I wasn't really seeing him clearly. It helped me relax and find more pleasure in our relationship."

Solomon believes that RIE's growth in popularity is timely.

"I think it's an antidote to what in this country [the US] has been called 'helicopter

parenting' - people who are anxious and hovering and feeling as though their babies have to be taught and exercised and encouraged to do things. We believe that a baby comes into the world with a level of competency and an ability to communicate and it takes a while to understand the cues. That's very different from someone who believes a baby is fragile and helpless and basically an empty vessel that needs to be taught and filled with information and exercised and pumped up. We care for babies based on how we see them."

The danger, of course, with any parenting philosophy - and one readily acknowledged by Solomon herself - is that it can become a dogma for parents who are desperate to be told what to do.

"The way I would look at it is that it's the mirror image of the conventional forms of intensive parenting, but it is no less intensive nevertheless; it just adopts a different strategy", says Frank Furedi, professor of sociology at the University of Kent in the UK and the author of *Paranoid Parenting*.

"The common denominator between the two strategies is this idea of child-centredness and the idea that somehow the child dictates in some way, shape or form their development. That to me is as clumsy and as misplaced as parental initiatives determining a child. In both cases what is overlooked is the relational aspect of it. I see this really as a kind of strategy that fairly affluent people with a fair amount of time at their disposal, who to some extent might be a little more confident than your typical suburban mum, can adopt and embrace."

Certainly, some of Gerber's recommendations, such as finding uninterrupted time to sit and gaze at your baby, and keeping shopping trips with your infant to a minimum - although undeniably appealing - are going to be easier for a Hollywood star with a bevy of staff than for your average mum trying to juggle the demands of work and children. I start to wonder how practical it really is.

"The theory of RIE seems quite sensible", says Kelly Rose Bradford, 37, who has a seven-year-old son, William. "Not taking your child to the mall is actually pretty sound - who really wants to take a baby on an extended shopping trip? - yet practicality dictates that it is something we have to do. That's great if you do have help or a sitter on hand, but for most mums, dragging a baby around the shops is just all part and parcel of everyday parenting."

I needn't worry too much about this, according to Solomon. Advocates are keen to stress that, as its name suggests, RIE is a resource, not a set of rules, so if bits of it don't work for you, you don't have to follow them. As Gerber herself said in her book, *Your Self-Confident Baby*: "You don't have to agree with everything. You can incorporate into your family's life what you find useful".

There's certainly much I would take on board if I had my time again. I like to think I'd be inclined to relax, chuck away the flashcards and wheel my baby out into the garden.

Whether you'd call that respect, empathy or just plain common sense, it sounds good to me.

The tenets of RIE

RIE is based on the notion that a baby should be accorded the same respect as an adult. Respecting your child involves trusting in her ability to develop at her own pace, rather than constantly intervening to show her what to do. These are the basic guidelines:

There's no need to push or stimulate your baby; left to her own devices, she will develop appropriately at her own speed;

The best environment for your child is one that is physically safe, with simple, age-appropriate objects to play with; you don't need to provide fancy toys or gadgets;

Children need plenty of time for uninterrupted play. Give your baby a chance to explore and learn by herself rather than constantly intervening;

Children learn from each other so arrange opportunities for your baby to interact with other infants;

When doing things like feeding and changing your baby, keep her involved, explaining what you are doing so she's not just a passive recipient;

Spend time every day observing your child without other distractions; this will help you to understand her needs; and

Be as consistent as you can. Children need predictability and clearly defined boundaries in order to feel secure and to reinforce discipline.