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Interview with parenting expert Deborah Carlisle Solomon

Author Deborah Carlisle Solomon
speaks on her upcoming book,
*"BABY KNOWS BEST: Raising a
Confident and Resourceful Child,
the RIE Way."*

Transcript

Jeffrey Clark: Hi. I'm Jeffrey Clark, editor of Working Parents Magazine and I'm speaking with Deborah Solomon, who's a mother, the Executive Director of the organization *Resources for Infant Educators* (RIE), and author of the book "BABY KNOWS BEST: Raising a Confident, Resourceful Child the RIE Way". The book will be released in mid-December and is already garnering a ton of publicity. Deborah, thanks so much for taking the time to chat!

I'd first like to share with our listeners that I received an advance copy of the book right around the same time our second child was born. So we actually had the opportunity to try out some of the techniques and approaches that Deborah discusses in the book. And, I generally had one of two reactions: either a point would make complete sense (and I'd wonder why it didn't occur to me before) or it was a completely new perspective on parenting and how to engage with my child...



Deborah Carlisle Solomon is a mother and the Executive Director of RIE. She has presented at various national and international conferences and workshops.



Photo credits for independent play setups for babies and toddlers at the Resources for Infant Educators' (RIE) Center in Los Angeles
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And with that intro, I'd like to turn it over now to Deborah - Could you please give our listeners a quick overview of **what Educaring is, and what the book is about?**

Deborah Solomon: Absolutely, Jeffrey. Thanks for inviting me to speak to your listeners. Magda Gerber, who was RIE's founding director, coined the term "Educaring" to mean that we should educate while we care, and care while we educate; that these two things are intertwined. So the intimate caregiving activities of feeding, diapering, bathing, and dressing a baby, provide valuable opportunities for a baby to learn about himself and also about others, about the people who care for him. And these are also valuable opportunities for relationship building between parent and child. Magda's Educaring approach is very comprehensive and gives parents the tools to build relationships with their babies based on respect. It also helps parents understand their babies better developmentally and as individual, unique human beings, and thus be able to respond to them more accurately. There are seven basic RIE principles that are part of this approach and this is what my book - *BABY KNOWS BEST* - is all about.

JC: So speaking about these principles, an important one you mention in the book is for parents to **be prepared and present**. No multi-tasking! On a basic level, this is just good practice: get all the diapering materials together **BEFORE** you change his diaper. But on a deeper level, you mention that it helps you focus on your child as a person, and it can actually facilitate "intimate togetherness". What do you mean by this and how does it work?

DS: That's a great question. When you prepare the environment ahead of time - so for instance the changing table, you have the fresh diaper ready, you have the wipes, maybe a warm washcloth, cream, a new outfit or pajamas, or whatever it might be - when everything is prepared, then when you bring the baby to the changing table you can be completely focused on what you're doing together. When you're able to give your full attention to the baby during these shared moments, then the message you convey to the baby is: "I care about you... You're important to me." And if we think about it from the baby's point of view, this is a very different experience than being

diapered by a parent who's multi-tasking - maybe talking to a partner, or a friend, watching television, or checking their text messages while they're giving a bottle. The diapering or whatever the care giving activity is, is something that you're doing with the baby, not to the baby in a mechanical sort of way. So for instance, the experience is not just about changing the diaper. On a deeper relationship level it is a back and forth sort of dance, an intimate shared experience through which you can convey to your baby how much you care for him, through your voice, your gaze, how you touch the baby, and your gestures. And so when we look upon these caregiving times as relationship building times, rather than just about completing a particular task, I think we become much more aware of the potential profundity of these interactions. As Magda reminded us, babies are diapered - even nowadays - thousands of times, probably, in their young lives, so why not make use of this really valuable time together?



JC: It boils down to basically treating the baby like a human being and engaging with that human on a human level.

DS: Right.

JC: Another principle you mention is the importance of **observing your child to understand her needs**. How does that work and what do we get from it?

DS: Observation is one of the basic RIE principles... it's very important. So for instance, let's say a baby has been playing quietly, manipulating and mouthing a set of rings for a little while and he begins to cry. Sometimes a parent may pick up the baby quickly to offer a bottle or the breast to quiet the cry. But what if the baby isn't hungry, but is crying because he's tired instead? So Magda suggested that we slow down and take a few moments first to observe the baby to try to understand why he's crying. Rather than having a goal of trying to quiet the crying quickly, we try to understand the cry first. This can be challenging for some parents, particularly new parents - certainly it was hard for me. Every time my son cried in the beginning, my heart broke and I rushed in very quickly. But Magda said just try to slow yourself down a little bit, wait just a moment, and then a moment longer, before responding. Sometimes if we can do that, in those brief moments we can see the reality of the situation.

JC: The idea that by seeing these different realities being different needs that the crying is actually different cries for different needs.

DS: Right. And it can take some time to figure out what the different cries mean. And sometimes we can also be confounded. We go through our list and all the basic needs have been met and we're still unclear, but we do our best. Parents feel anxious because they feel unsure. Sometimes narrating what we're seeing can help to relieve some anxiety: "You're crying really hard. I'm trying so hard to understand what you need. I wonder what you're trying to tell me. Are you hungry? I don't think so, I just fed you. Are you too warm in that outfit? You don't feel warm. Ah! Look what time it is. Maybe you're ready to rest already." So the narrating can also help the process. Observe, and then narrate what we see - it can help us to be more calm.

JC: And that's exactly leading into my next comment. I mentioned, I've gone through the book and attempted some of the techniques with my own son. One of these was to talk to him, **narrating what was happening** - such as when I was changing his diaper, or when we were putting him to bed. And I found - for myself at least - that it helped me be more calm and connected with him. And if I'm calm, while



he's wailing, I'll ask him what's wrong and try to read his queues, rather than get frustrated with him. Now, I've only been utilizing the Educaring approach for a few weeks. What kinds of impacts have you seen on parents who've employed the approach for longer periods?

DS: Well, specifically in regard to the narrating, in the beginning some parents say it feels strange to narrate to a young baby about what's happening. But they also say that it helps them to stay present with their baby rather than have their mind wander off somewhere else. It can be very hard to stay present with someone who can't speak to you. Narrating helps you stay there - in the moment with the baby.

I believe that most parents would say that it takes some practice and time to internalize the Educaring approach. But if they can do just three things, I think it can have enormous impact on how parents become calmer and to be more confident. The more confident the parent, I believe the more peaceful the baby. The three things I suggest the parents start with when they first come to class, or when reading or learning about the approach, are these steps:

1 - Slow down. Just slowing down creates a sense of peacefulness and allows even a young baby to follow what's happening. When you think about the difference in how you feel when you're rushing or even just moving at a brisk pace versus when you take the time to move slowly, it's not surprising that this would have such a difference for babies.

It's still important for life to move slowly for toddlers too. Sometimes when toddlers are thought to be uncooperative, it's just that life is moving too quickly for them and they can't keep up. So, slowing down is the first step.

2 - Practice telling your baby what you're going to do, before you do it. "I'd like to pick you up now. I'm going into the other room and I'll be right back." When we are in the habit of telling the baby what we're going to do, the baby can relax. She knows there's going to be no surprises.

3 - Tarry time. This was coined by RIE associate Diana Suskind. It's the time between when you tell the baby what's going to happen and when you actually do it. So after you tell the baby "I'm going to pick you up now," you tarry, or wait for her to process what's been said and let you know she's ready. She might raise her arms up or have a look on her face of anticipation and you'll know that now she's ready to be picked up. This is important because babies take more time to process than we do. If we just say we're going to pick you up and then pick up the baby, it will still feel very abrupt for the baby and she won't be able to quite keep up with what's going on.

So practice slowing down, practice telling your baby what you're going to do, and give tarry time for her to process. These three things can have an enormous impact and parents say just doing these three things helps them to feel much more peaceful and it makes an enormous difference.

JC: I mentioned earlier that there were some techniques that were quite different from what I was used to. For example, with our daughter, we swaddled her. Sometimes, she'd break out, but for the most part, it helped keep her calm when going to sleep. So I was surprised to see that in your book, *swaddling is actually strongly discouraged*. I decided to then free my son's arms, to just give it a shot, and he doesn't seem to be any the worse for not being swaddled.

Why is having the freedom to move so important for the infant?

DS: That's another good question. In *BABY KNOWS BEST*, I suggest that with all interventions - whether it's swaddling or pacifiers, or anything else - that a parent first observe the baby to see what the baby might need, rather than assume the baby needs an

intervention. Once we introduce an intervention babies very quickly habituate to them, and I'll hear parents say "Gee wiz. I wish I never started that to begin with." As you discovered, with your son, some young babies don't need to be swaddled. So first observe - go back to that basic RIE principle - observe and see how your baby does without the intervention. If a parent feels that something is needed, a sleep sack would be preferable because it allows the arms and hands to be free. And so therefore the baby can access her hands - and this of course is important for learning how to self-sooth. Also, a sleep sack is loose around the hips and legs, so the baby can lay on her back with her hips fully relaxed in an open position. So that freedom of movement is important.

If a parent finds that they do want to use some sort of intervention, it's really important to continue to observe the baby, to see when she no longer needs it... If she rejects the pacifier when it's offered to her. You know, babies change so quickly and what they might welcome one week, they may no longer need the next. So that observation piece is really, really important.

There's actually in the book mention of a video of a one-day-old baby in a bassinet, and he's un-swaddled and he's asleep, but he's moving, sometimes in that sort of jerking fashion that young newborn babies exhibit. And at one point he startles, opens his eyes just a bit, and then just as quickly he closes them and then goes back to sleep. So it's natural for newborns to have these restless sort of movements. But seeing this can be unsettling sometimes for new parents, who may then bundle their baby in a swaddling blanket. I would just suggest - just like you did with your son - to give it a try, without a swaddle and see how your baby does.



JC: And while freedom is important for the infant, so is discipline, routine, and boundaries. **How early should one start setting limits for their children and how should they go about it?**

DS: Magda Gerber said that lack of discipline is not kindness, it is neglect. So of course we are the most important models for our children - they are observing our behavior all the time, and they look to us to learn what is appropriate and what is not. If we want our children to behave kindly, then we need to model kindness ourselves. But it can take practice for them to be gentle and to learn to be kind and respectful, so we start to set limits with young babies. As soon as they do something that is undesirable, we let them know - kindly and patiently. Perhaps a baby pulls up on you and tries to tug on your glasses. You can say "I don't want you to pull on those," and put your hand in front of your glasses so they can't be touched. Or maybe you're sitting on the floor and your baby crawls over to you and tries to chew on your toes and you can say "I don't want you to chew on my toes, but here's something that you can chew on..." Offer an alternative, preferably two, so that your baby has a choice of something that is ok bite and chew on other than your toes. Sometimes we have to set limits over and over again, until the child finally internalizes the limit and becomes self-disciplined. It's not an overnight, immediate occurrence, a "if I say it once, you abide by my limits" sort of thing. It takes patience and sometimes it take fortitude.

JC: Finally, what are a few quick **strategies parents can utilize to help their babies or toddlers communicate, problem-solve, and self-sooth?**

DS: Hmm... I don't know any QUICK strategies. This is probably just the opposite of what you what to hear, but it all takes time. I don't think anything of value is learned quickly - or very few things (I can't think of anything). So we need to give our children time. Give your baby or toddler time to communicate and give yourself as a parent time to understand what they're telling you. We parents don't have to have the answers right away and sometimes we won't have any answer at all - we'll be completely flummoxed. But that's ok. We can say "I'm trying really hard to understand why you're



crying, but I just don't know. I can hold you until you're all done." We can give our babies time to problem-solve. If a baby is working to pick up and grasp a certain toy, we can sit on our hands and deal with our own impatience and desire to "help". I think the more that we're able to let our babies figure out things on their own, where we observe and we're emotionally available nearby, without interrupting, without side coaching or giving direction, the more our babies will develop tenacity and a long attention span, and their own important problem-solving skills.

Deborah C. Solomon: *Baby Knows Best* Interview

Also give babies time to practice self-soothing. The parents who are able to not rush in just as soon as their baby cries, gives their baby the opportunities to practice self-soothing skills. It doesn't mean we leave a baby to cry and cry, but maybe as a start we move slowly toward the crying baby, rather than rushing in quickly. So I'm probably telling you just the opposite - you wanted quick strategies - but in fact I think it all takes time for, as Magda said, for a child's readiness to unfold. And it is an unfolding, a developing, an adding to, and it's not quick, but maybe it's important for parents to realize that they can relax and give their babies whatever time they need.

JC: Thank you. You know, it's a good reminder of what it means to grow and to develop as a human being, and that in our quick-fix world, with instant communication, instant fixes, that sometimes the best way is - as you said - time and practice and slowing down. I think we're beginning to see this even as a culture, that these things are truly important for us to maintain our sanity and to actually be happy, and to raise happy and confident human beings - such as our children. So I really do thank you for calling us back to those important elements for raising our children.

So thank you very much, Deborah, for this really helpful session. And, listeners, the book is called "BABY KNOWS BEST" and it's currently available for order in the iTunes bookstore. Thank you very much, Deborah!

DS: Thank you, Jeffrey!



take the time.

