

HOW UNDERSTANDING FAMILY SYSTEMS PROMOTES THE RESPECTFUL CARE OF CHILDREN

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Magda Gerber’s approach to respectful care of infants and children begins with the idea of seeing infants, from the moment they are born, as whole, competent people. This approach named the RIE philosophy, or Resources for Infant Educators has a simple core belief: respect infants by seeing them as capable participants in their world (Gerber, 2013, p. xv). The guidelines of this theory seem intuitive but in practice are often countercultural and are occasionally difficult to put into practice without significant perspective shifts. This approach has now been established as a non-profit organization with the primary goal of teaching families respectful parenting. With this approach, Magda Gerber founded the Program for Infants and Toddlers (PITC), a program for low-income and at-risk children. The PITC program inspired the framework of many future infant and toddler childcare programs. Learning technical principles and research from the Family Systems Theory related to attachment theory, conflict, and power in family dynamics might allow parents and educators to better understand and put into practice the principles of RIE. This understanding will ultimately promote more respectful care of young children.

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Educaring and Attachment

Magda Gerber, an ordinary Hungarian parent, realized she was embarking on motherhood with little knowledge of child-rearing. She soon turned to Dr. Emmi Pikler, a Hungarian pediatrician who was developing groundbreaking clinical research on infants' gross motor development in orphanages. Gerber began working with Dr. Pikler, turning her attention to research, where she recognized infants' intrinsic motivation to learn motor processes and understand their world. After being forced to flee Hungary as a refugee in 1957, Gerber continued her work in Los Angeles where she adapted Dr. Pikler's research to support infants in family settings, rather than the clinical orphanages where Dr. Pikler worked. After collaborating with other early childhood professionals, she established the RIE center, where she demonstrated her approach to others.

Gerber's teachings at the RIE center outline an unconventional pathway to attachment, so exploring attachment theory offers theoretical reasoning behind RIE's approach. The key principles of attachment theory will first be discussed. Attachment theory defines the types of bonds that form between an infant and a caregiver (Warren, 2021). The ideal bond is known as secure attachment, when an infant anticipates their needs will be met from a consistent caregiver. The caregiver can achieve this attachment by repeatedly and warmly responding to the infant's cries and other communicated needs (Warren, 2021). This bond results in children who feel confident to explore their environment and grow apart from their caregiver while viewing them as an available and secure base. Children who are securely attached have better outcomes than those who have other forms of attachment (Warren, 2021). These children feel confident in the ability to separate and reunite with their parents within the safety of their parents' consistent care. This comfort children feel from consistent responsiveness may take many forms- the RIE method offers one approach.

RIE forges attachment through the practices of "educaring," independent play, and handling conflicts between children. Educaring involves maintaining complete intimacy and attention during caregiving tasks. Examples of caregiving tasks include changing an infant's diaper, feeding, bathing, or dressing an infant (Hammond, 2021). Traditional parenting might view diaper changes as an unpleasant time in which infants are often uncomfortable or upset. To diminish children's discomfort, parents might distract children with a song or appealing toy. The parents may also rush through the process to quiet the child's discomfort as quickly as possible and to console them. A RIE parent might approach an uncomfortable baby needing to be changed in a way that leans into discomfort as a means of connection and respect; this is countercultural.

This parent would not distract, console, or rush, but instead, acknowledge the child's discomfort and join them with empathy. If the child communicates that they would rather be doing something else, such as looking at something in another room, the parent would observe the child and their interest. Then, the parent may recognize the child's interest verbally before returning an infant's attention back to the diaper changing process. Perhaps most importantly to Gerber's followers, children are not distracted by or rushed through diaper changes because they believe that it is not respecting an infant's body. It is seen as a predecessor to understanding consent to involve the child in the process of their body being touched so intimately, rather than being urged to not pay attention to what is done to their body. To facilitate this, these parents ask their baby to collaborate with them on the task of changing diapers; the parent asks the child to assist by lifting their legs or pulling open the diaper tabs. RIE parents believe this process of slowing down allows babies to feel seen, taken care of, and respected (Gerber, 2013, p.33). Secure attachment figures are responsive (Warren, 2021); therefore, when caregivers allow the baby to act as a participant in diaper changes, this responsive care fosters secure attachment. After these caregiving tasks, RIE parents are instructed to give infants ample time to play independently and entertain themselves without unnecessary adult intervention (Gonzalez-Mena, 2013, p.45). This is where parents may demonstrate to their children that they are a secure base for attachment, as the children are allowed time to explore from birth. When the child needs their caregiver again, the infant is given complete attention by the caregiver until the baby's needs are met. Understanding the complete theory behind Gerber's ideas about caregiving times and independent play may encourage parents and practitioners to apply these principles when it feels uncomfortable to face a child's discomfort during a diaper change without rushing or consoling to allow for additional time for infants to participate in caregiving. If these ideas promote more securely attached babies, and securely attached babies have better outcomes, sharing these ideals may improve the livelihoods of some children.

Infant Cries and Conflict

The conflict and communication in conflict styles, established by the Family Systems Theory, also supports RIE's philosophy surrounding tension and conflict when caring for children. The earliest conflicts with infants might begin from babies' cries. Gerber believed that babies should be allowed and encouraged to express negative feelings (Gerber, 2013, p. 7). This may feel counter to the perception many adults have of an infant's cry, as many feel it is combative, stressful, something to fear, and something that is the adult's ultimate responsibility to fix or stop.

This perspective can be shifted by understanding the theory of pluralistic families, which are those who are able to deal with conflict preemptively, use direct communication, and do not shy away from conflict with other family members (Segrin & Flora, 2019). Accepting and not feeling alarmed by a baby's cry is part of modeling these pluralistic conflict patterns. The RIE method attempts to not only accept cries, but also to be proactive in reducing incidents of a child's discomfort by providing a consistent and predictable routine (Gonzalez-Mena, 2013, p.44). This conveys the pluralistic conflict pattern of preemptively coping with conflict. Viewing an infant's cry as a potential miscommunication from caregivers, such as missing a step in a routine, is also an example of communal coping. For example, RIE parents are encouraged to tell a baby that they will be picking them up before they do so, especially if the baby is currently focused on another activity, like a toy. If a parent misses this step in routine and picks the child up without forewarning, the child may cry. Then, rather than immediately seeking to pacify the child, the caregiver might provide empathy for the child by not avoiding this moment of conflict and seeing the cries as communication. The parent might then apologize to the child for missing the step in the routine, fulfilling the direct communication requirement of the pluralistic conflict model.

Communal coping, another model of familial coping in the Family Systems Theory, is a highly effective coping method in which families work to solve problems as a group (Segrin & Flora, 2019). Utilizing and modeling communal coping is advantageous, as strong family coping methods are seen as resources in the ABC-X model of family stress (Segrin & Flora, 2019). This model measures the number of resources a family has to cope with stress. Some of the most important resources a family can have in this model are effective and appropriate family conflict styles and communication styles. The more effective resources a family has under this model, the more likely they are to effectively cope with a stressor (Segrin & Flora, 2019). Communal coping may help parents shift their perspectives on how to handle a crying infant. In the example of the crying infant that was picked up unexpectedly, the caregiver would work with their infant to determine the source of the cry, reflecting on the baby's state of needs as well as their own actions. This communal approach reflects how the caregiver sees an infant's cries as reflective of how the environment might affect them, rather than only the infant's internal state of need. Teaching families how to use effective conflict strategies, such as communal coping and the pluralistic conflict style, and communicating how these approaches are stronger coping methods, might allow families to more effectively move through conflict and stress. The RIE method provides clear strategies for communal coping and pluralistic conflict styles. As the RIE method is currently not widely understood or known, teaching families about these conflict and communication styles from the Family Systems Theory might help them to better understand the intricacies of the RIE approach. In turn, this may help families to implement the respectful parenting strategies of RIE into their own homes.

Power in Work with Children

RIE discourages the use of conventional dynamics of power with children, such as using rewards and punishments. It may be helpful for families to understand the theories surrounding the dynamics of power in the Family Systems Theory to support RIE's alternative disciplinary measures. Power dynamics expressed in a child and caregiver relationship are an important part of secure attachments, as power consists of the capability one has to change another's behavior and its strength is determined by how dependent one is on the other (Segrin & Flora, 2019). With the RIE method, parents are encouraged to influence their children's behavior without offering rewards or praise. Instead, a parent might state, in a neutral tone, that the child's behavior is appreciated (Gerber, 2013, p. 11). This may be because reward power, or trying to change another's actions by providing a reward, is only effective when the reward is actively wanted (Segrin & Flora, 2019). For reward power to work, the recipient, the child, must want the reward each time, which is challenging to predict and may be unreliable. Initial rewards become tiring and no longer wanted. Then, rewards need to be continually changed or increased to be motivating. RIE parents also do not use coercive power, which consists of trying to change one's behavior by threatening punishments (Segrin & Flora, 2019). Gerber believed when parents become angry or beg their children to comply, children feel that they are too powerful, which creates fear in them that they are not safe and secure, thus damaging attachment (Gerber, 2013, p.11). For this reason, RIE practitioners use referent power, which asserts that one has power based on the role one plays within that dynamic (Segrin & Flora). This type of power may be demonstrated by telling a child that they will be stopped from playing with something unsafe and explaining why they should not. In this way, the child understands over time that it is the caregiver's role to stop them from doing things that are unsafe or that may hurt others. They also recognize that they are not responsible for maintaining their own safety, and they are confident in continuing to view their parents as their secure base. It may occasionally be difficult to not rely on coercive and reward power as they may seem easier than referent power in moments where caring for children is difficult. It is often quicker to offer a reward, such as candy, to influence a child to do something than to face conflict in the pluralistic way and stop a child from doing something with referent power. As such, understanding power dynamics is important to explain Gerber's disagreement with rewards and punishments and may help caregivers to rely on referent power when children need boundaries.

Positive Parenting and Outcomes for Children

Applying a positive parenting approach like the RIE method may help families to break cycles of generational parenting patterns and to improve childhood outcomes. Poverty may be a factor that increases the likelihood of childhood mistreatment according to the Family Stress Model, or FSM (Masarik & Conger, 2017). This is understandable when contextualizing that poverty causes increased stress on parents. Families living in poverty may have to leave their children unsupervised more often because they must work outside of the home, and parents may not have experience and training in child development or child rearing. Despite this risk factor for negative parenting, Masarik and Conger (2017) outlined the following about a study of families in poverty:

There is also support in the FSM literature that positive or adaptive parenting practices are linked to child wellbeing, even in the face of economic stress. For instance, parents who engaged in warm and supportive behaviors toward their child were more likely to have preschoolers who were securely attached and engaged in self-regulatory behaviors, which in turn, predicted better cognitive outcomes in first grade. In brief, several researchers noted that positive parenting behaviors were associated with child and adolescent increases in mastery, pro-social behavior, optimism, and healthy eating behaviors as well as reductions in internalizing symptoms, delinquency, and risky health behaviors. (pp. 3-4)

When parents can engage in positive, warm, and supportive relationships with their children, despite the extreme familial stress of poverty, children experience better outcomes. Perhaps establishing training in positive parenting methods for parents who may have very high stress measures in the FSM may reduce the effect of poverty on children's outcomes. Families in poverty are often stuck in multi-generational cycles due to systemic societal factors (Cherlin, 2018). The multi-generational nature of this family stress may result in several generations of challenging parent-child relationships. While more research is needed on both the effects of positive parenting on these risk factors and on potential interventions to encourage positive parenting, it seems worthwhile to discuss the potential of positive parenting to reduce the negative effects of family stress in childhood.

The RIE method teaches parents to respond to their children in ways that are sensitive and work to understand their point of view. For a family without stress, these approaches promote more respectful relationships. Masarik and Conger's (2017) research might indicate that sharing the RIE method may also help families with stress mitigate the effects stress may have on their future development. The research may also indicate the impact positive parenting may have on families with less stress on improving parent-child relationships, family dynamics, and childhood outcomes.

Conclusion

Studying family dynamics and relational factors such as attachment theory, conflict, and power offer tools to describe to parents, families, and practitioners why the RIE principles are important and worthwhile parenting approaches. If more families can be effectively educated in the RIE method, it may help children to feel secure in themselves through secure attachment, eliminate inappropriate power dynamics with referent power, improve a family's process of coping with conflict, and might have the potential to reduce the effect of adverse experiences. It may be worth creating accessible training resources that teach the RIE method that contextualize RIE through theory, such as Family Systems Theory, because of its emphasis on respectful care. When children are cared for respectfully, their caregivers are modeling a code of behavior that children may repeat with their peers, other authority figures, and with themselves. RIE places particular attention to considering the perspective of the child and allowing the child to be present with their emotions rather than pacifying them. This issue of pacification seems particularly relevant in a world that discusses the way in which individuals often cope through distraction with things like technology or food, rather than facing conflict and negative emotions. RIE's promotion of a child's bodily autonomy and involvement of children in their own care when bodily consent cannot be maintained teaches the child that they have agency over their own body. These early teachings of consent seem relevant in society that grapples with the nature of consent, how to conceptualize it for children, and the consequences of not properly communicating its nature. Finally, RIE's disciplinary approach of facing conflict rather than ending them quickly with rewards or incentives may introduce an alternative to instant gratification, which has been discussed in popular culture as a problematic and limited motivational force. While these factors require empirical inquiry as they relate to RIE, and cannot be related causally, it seems notable to begin approaching each of these issues proactively at each stage of education and childcare. The foundation children receive from their parents in early childhood, of course, has a lasting effect on their life beyond their parent's care. If shifting a parent's approach to parenting may have a more positive and respectful impact on their children, it may be worth establishing research, training, and intervention programs to further promote such positive parenting models.

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