

Putting respect for infants and toddlers into action

by Sola Freeman



Do we really show respect towards infants' or toddlers' ability to be responsible for their needs in the environment in which they sleep? In this article the author will share her experience of using a low bed (not a cot) for all four of her children. The author hopes that sharing the philosophical reasons and practical application of a low bed in the home environment may encourage early childhood teachers to consider moving away from the use of cots in the centre environment and move towards low beds for both infants and toddlers.



Sharing an afternoon snooze.

Introduction

I believe children should grow up in an environment of love, where they are treated respectfully and warmly, where they are empowered to be competent and confident beings who can make choices, be independent and influence their world. This influences all my parenting decisions.

What follows is a description of how the application of this attitude led me to choose using a low bed for my children rather than the traditional cot.

The foundation stone of the Montessori philosophy is to 'follow the child'. This means to honour children's ability to know what they need - to follow their rhythms - in sleep, food and play.

My experience as a Montessori teacher meant that I went into parenting with a degree of confidence. I was determined to stick to my overall objective of enabling children to find for themselves, and use, their innate capabilities.

However life threw me into the parenting deep-end with my firstborn being fraternal twin boys: Fiann and Cared, born in 2000. Looking back I can honestly say this approach was seriously hard work to maintain with two, but it got easier with the following two babies: Nea in 2003 and Cashel in 2005 (both daughters).

Partnered with Montessori's respectful approach to babies is another significant guiding principle, known as the 'prepared environment'.

This manifests itself in the Montessori classroom which caters for a specific age group (either birth to three, three to six, six to nine, or nine to twelve years). The classroom environment is prepared with equipment that meets the developmental needs of a specific age group. It provides all of them with a calm, ordered setting in which they can predict, make choices, be independent and take responsibility. My approach to parenting was to therefore do the same at home, to prepare the home environment to aid and respect the capabilities of my children as they develop.

Putting it into action in the home

By bringing the concepts of 'following the child' and the 'prepared environment' together, I believe the Montessori philosophy offers an approach to infants and toddlers that gives them a calm, secure, predictable environment which allows them to be independent and empowered, but also responds to their needs with respect and love. All key curriculum requirements for the infant and toddler as stated in *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996) are included.

When my children were young babies our home life revolved exclusively around them – responding immediately to their cries, meeting their needs for food, nappy changing and sleep. As they got older their needs began to become more in sync with the general comings and goings of the family – they fed when we ate, and slept when the rest of us slept. While I hadn't specifically set out to have a routine we seemed to move towards one, the predictability of which became more important as they moved into toddlerhood. However there was always flexibility within that routine.

For me it is important to give children room to explore freely and to be independent in making choices for themselves. This sits alongside my firm belief that a child has rights *with* responsibilities. With a household of four children I need to have a strong sense of order. There are clear and consistent boundaries which provide the security the children need. I have clear expectations that they are to be cooperative and caring children towards each other, and me!

Respect means freedom of movement

Dr Maria Montessori advocated strongly for freedom of movement for children, arguing that their learning would occur naturally and to its fullest within an environment that they could manipulate for themselves. She saw the child as an active participant in his or her own development.

Maria Montessori's philosophy is more commonly known for children aged three to six; however she saw her approach catering for birth to adulthood. Her ideas for infants were captured in detail by Dr. Silvana Montanaro (1991) and more

recently represented by Paula Polk Lillard and Lynn Lillard Jessen (2003).

Much of what she advocated is now considered the norm in our approach to infants and toddlers: demand feeding; building a warm, rich, intimate relationship with one significant person – usually the mother; creating a predictable environment; and providing many levels of communication, from touch to singing, to stimulate the many connections happening for the young baby.

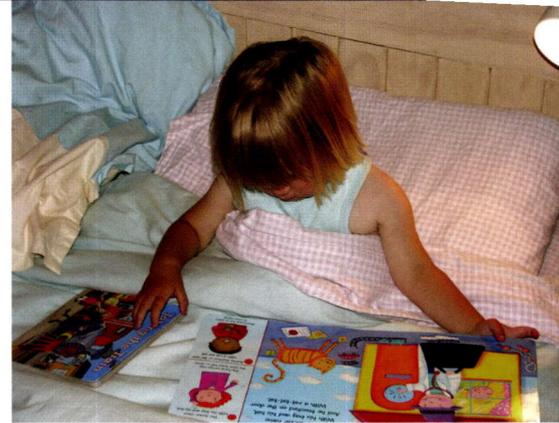
However, Montessori went many steps further in her application of the principles of respect and empowerment. Two ideas that she advocated, which are contrary to our current western approach to raising babies, are to feed the older infant and toddler at a low table – avoiding the use of high chairs and using a low bed rather than a cot. I have done both of the above and would recommend both. Not using a cot would be among the best decisions we made about the environment.

I am not alone in thinking that the respectful approach of the Montessori philosophy resonates strongly with the approach of Dr Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber (Greenwald, 2008; Kovach, 2004; Porter, 2006). I have yet to find any reference from Emmi Pikler or Magda Gerber towards using a low bed or not, but I do note that the Reggio Emilia approach uses a low basket with an opening the baby can crawl into (Ceppi & Zini, 1998).

I refer to these other approaches not to justify Maria Montessori's ideas, because I believe they stand on their own. But I do want to highlight the common thread that emerges from these three philosophies – a deep sense of respect for babies and toddlers and their capabilities. And in particular an approach that identifies a prepared environment that allows for those capabilities to be expressed and developed. I do believe these philosophies do more than talk about our young children as being capable and competent – they actually provide a framework to make it happen.

Putting philosophy into action

When they were three months old, we moved Fiann and Cared out of their shared bassinet and onto a shared low bed – a mattress on a slat base – slightly raised



Cashel reading.

(about 2 cm) off the floor, total height about 20 cms, with no sides. Both Nea and Cashel outgrew their bassinet and moved into a low bed at eight weeks.

The philosophy behind the low bed is to provide visual freedom and freedom of movement, and to empower your child to recognise and choose their time to sleep. Montanaro (1991) notes that the process of myelination of the nerve fibres begins with the eyes, and at about one month the baby is able to follow what is happening in their environment. From that point they have the "freedom to observe" and as she says, "Adults should recognize this process and give the child the opportunity to make use of his new ability" (p. 110). Placing a baby on a low bed allows for this capacity for observation to be used and improved as there is no obstruction for their vision.

I noticed this with all my babies – they would often drift off to sleep either gazing at themselves in the mirror alongside their bed or out the window of which they had a clear view. I remember in particular outside Nea's bedroom when she was a baby was a lovely tree that would often sway and cause dappled patterns in the sun. I would often find her dreamily gazing out her window – what a wonderfully peaceful way to drift off to sleep or to wake to.

Before being able to crawl the boys would often gurgle to each other. Nea and Cashel would wake and spend some calm private time – looking intently at themselves in the mirror, out the window or the mobile above their bed. Then when ready they would give a loud yell for someone to come, and always be full of smiles when you arrived in the room.

In addition to the freedom to observe, the low bed allows for freedom of movement. As the babies began to move, they naturally began to experiment from the moment they woke up. The low bed meant there were no frustrating boundaries for their movement in their bed and around their room.



Nea getting out of bed.

This becomes acutely important around the time children are toddling. The low bed was a physical companion to our encouragement for the children to choose when they needed to sleep or get up. The low bed was inviting and easy for them to use.

My experience has shown me how capable infants and toddlers are to learn to recognise their need to sleep and to be able to act on it. Montanaro (1991) argues, "We have to recognize our profound lack of comprehension for the capacities of the infant. From this stems our lack of faith in them, which impedes their development" (p. 114).

I have a lovely video of Nea at 14 months ready for her daytime nap. She toddles slowly down the hall towards her bedroom sucking her thumb; there is a wee tired stumble, then she clammers into her low bed and snuggles into her pillow waiting for me to pull up the blankets for her. The satisfaction of getting into her own bed by herself can be seen all over her face!

Of course as soon as they become mobile, children can get themselves out of bed, choose to have a play in their own room or venture out to join the rest of the family. During their infant and toddler years, Fiann, Cared, Nea and Cashel were able to bring themselves to our bed when they woke in the morning and did not have to cry or yell for us to get them out of a cot. This meant peaceful starts to the morning with many long snuggles together in our bed to start the day. We still get Cashel joining us regularly and Nea too, with the occasional visit from the big boys!

It is inevitable that children will test their independence and choose not to go to bed, but they need to be able to do that, and my experience is that the testing doesn't last long. You can reduce the testing even further by providing a clear bedtime routine, ensuring you synchronise the routine to when they are tired and by giving them choices and responsibilities around bedtime.

For example we gave them all bedside lamps at about two years old. We

explained that they needed to stay in bed but could read a few books and when finished or tired turn their own light off. This responsibility was eagerly accepted and we would often return to their room later to find Cared or Nea had put their books away, their light off and were fast asleep, or Fiann and Cashel, still in bed, light still on, but fast asleep with a book still open resting on their face! The result of this has been toddlers (and now children) eager to get to bed to be read to and then to have space to enjoy books for themselves and slowly succumb to sleep in their own way.

In contrast, the general practice seems to be to move children from a cot to a bed when they are two – right at the time when they are exploring their independence. It is no wonder parents have trouble with toddlers going to bed. When the physical confinement of a cot has been removed and they are suddenly given the freedom of a bed, it is inevitable that they will exercise their new found freedom! This problem never really eventuates if your children experience freedom, independence and responsibility right from when they are babies.

Safer than alternatives

A common question asked about the low bed is; "but don't they fall out of bed?" Sure, when they start moving, there is the occasional accidental roll out of the bed at first – but none of my children were much perturbed by the experience. Soon, they're rolling out deliberately as their first means of moving about.

Using a low bed of about 20cm in height with a soft mat or pillow next to it for an early crawler meant I had no bumps, bruises or accidents.

The reality is that a low bed avoids all the safety problems of cots. Research by Monash University Accident Research Centre showed cots have the highest mortality rate of all nursery furniture – through asphyxia and entrapment (Watson, et al., 1997).

The natural development of movement

Following the Montessori approach of giving babies time and space to develop, and honouring their capability to action their wants and needs led me to explore the ideas of Dr Emmi Pikler and Magda Gerber (Gerber, 2002). With Nea and Cashel I really did see the advantages of letting their movement develop naturally, in particular never putting them in a position they couldn't get into or out of themselves. They both seemed to enjoy their 'play-time' with calm concentrated efforts in exploring the movements they were capable of, with no frustration in being 'stuck'.

If after reading this article you are inspired in your work with infants and toddlers then please explore further the writings of Dr. Maria Montessori and Dr. Emmi Pikler.

And do consider whether those cots in your centre are really necessary – are you really respecting the capabilities of your infants and toddlers; are they able to be responsible for getting into and out of their sleep space by themselves?

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