

Learning from Babies is an Early Childhood Education

In recent months, I have received two wonderful gifts from my own children. In summer 2022, my granddaughter was born, joined a year later by my grandson. Naturally, as their proud ‘Granny’, I can attest that our two babies are beautiful: perfect in every way! I am truly blessed. Indeed, these two tiny new family members, aged 16 months and 5 months currently, have transformed my life. Since each was born, my happiness is contingent on knowing they are - and feel - loved, happy, fed, well, clean and stimulated. I can report that their parents are doing an excellent job of parenting, and my happiness quotient is high. Nevertheless, my adjustment to becoming a grandparent has generated cognitive dissonance within me. I find that being a grandparent is different from being a parent. Although I am fortunate to spend time with my grandchildren regularly, I am not one of their primary carers. I am a step away, and I must temper my natural urge to ‘help’ my grandchildren’s parents in every possible way as they navigate the inevitable challenges, demands and complexities of parenting. It is important that I respect the space, time, and privacy my grandchildren and their parents need to evolve and establish their own ways of being and becoming families, while also growing as individuals within these constructs they are building together. That respect is an important *functioning* for my children and theirs: ‘being or doing what (they) value and have reason to value’ and enjoy (Alkire and Deneulin, 2009: 22; Sen, 1993).

Although I am not with my grandchildren every day, internationally, increasing numbers of grandparents are caring for their grandchildren often and regularly, due to recent economic, social and demographic changes (Buchanan and Rotkirch, 2018). Young children’s engagements with their grandparents are recognised for their positive effects on young children’s cognitive and language development and well-being (Coall and Hertwig, 2010; Sari, 2023). That may be so, but when I spend time with my grandchildren, I find that I am the main beneficiary. Whilst I may have worked as an educator for over four decades, my grandchildren are teaching me. In this paper, I briefly share and discuss six lessons they have taught me so far. Each is standalone, but as is the case for all good learning, there are also connections between them.

Lessons from my Grandchildren

Lesson 1 is the **foregrounding of our physical, social and emotional needs**. As adults, all too often we ignore our personal basic needs to prioritise the demands of work and other pressing concerns in our daily lives, though this may not be good for us (Cilli, Ranieri, Guerra, Ferri and Di Giacomo, 2022). Our grandchildren know the importance of their needs being met, and since birth they have told us when they are tired, hungry, thirsty, need connection with another human, want to play, or feel unwell, happy, or sad. At 16 months, our little granddaughter is just now beginning to utter words in her home language, so both of our babies’ expressive communications to date have been conducted through universal languages including gesture, cries, gurgles, eye contact, gaze, touch and reach. Their parents – and we grandparents - strive always to recognise their meanings and respond to them. Often our attempts are clumsy, but persevering is important because it is how we know what our babies need and we then supply it. By doing so, we are building the trust and love that underpin secure attachment and nurture the emotional, behavioural and attentional foundations of self-regulation which are crucial pathways to successful lifetime outcomes (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000; Waldfogel, 2006).

Lesson 2 is the **importance of rhythm in our lives**. *Lesson 2* aligns with *Lesson 1* in respect of maintaining everyday routines that are fundamental to high quality care for young children (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 1998). As grandparents, we have learned our grandchildren's daily routines and how to attune to them when we are together. Yet our grandchildren have also reminded us of the importance of rhythm in movement and music that we first learned when we were babies, then again as parents. We rock our babies rhythmically because it soothes them, often to sleep (Omlin, Crivelli, Heinicke, Zaunseder, Achermann and Riener, 2016). Rocking stimulates the baby's vestibular system which promotes posture, balance and spatial orientation, and develops the brain's cerebellum in ways that support cognitive processes, including reading later on (Blythe, 2017). We sing in time to the rocking, as have our ancestors through millennia (Leinweber, 2021). By doing so, we calm ourselves and our babies, build emotional connection, enrich our everyday lives, and we positively affect every aspect of our babies' development, including language acquisition, attention, and prosocial skills (Baltagi, 2023; Fancourt and Perkins, 2018; Pocwierz-Marciniak and Harciarek, 2021; Trehub and Trainor, 1998).

Lesson 3 has taught me *prima facie* **the value of a slower pace of life**. *Lesson 3* connects with *Lesson 2* as our new child-focused routines shift our attention 'from the macro to the micro', requiring us to recalibrate our relationship with time (Clark, 2022: 15). On days when we are with our grandchildren, the busy-ness of our work, social and home lives that previously filled every day are subordinate to the slower pace that being with young children dictates. We sit for hours doing nothing but holding one of our babies. We have lingered over watching a spider's journey around a room, singing one nursery rhyme repeatedly, playing 'peepo' many times, and moving in, out and around a cardboard box again and again. Each activity assumes intense importance in the moment, and we experience pure joy as we lose track of time in attending to those intimate worlds of our babies' interests.

Lesson 4 has congruence with *Lesson 3* but is different: when we slow down, **we appreciate the simple things, including the natural world** (McCree, Cutting and Sherwin, 2018). A visit to the local park is full of wonder and excitement for our grandchildren and reawakens those feelings in us when we accompany them. Our attention is drawn, in turn, to a pile of leaves, a puddle, mud, a bird, a flower and the wind and our focus on each is all-consuming. As we encounter each experience with our grandchildren, we remember what it is to be open to exploring: our senses and thinking are stimulated, and our affective states are transformed positively (Duflos, Lane and Brussoni, 2023).

Lesson 5 is associated with *Lessons 1-4* and is the **pleasure and comfort derived from sharing experiences**. From the beginning, babies share their mothers' bodies prenatally, then postnatally when breastfeeding, of course. Equally, babies' shared experiences with both their mothers and fathers are located within the context of their parents' biological programming for bonding and caring for them (Fisher et al., 2018). But as time has passed and our grandchildren have continued to grow, increasingly we grandparents have shared experiences with them. So far, these have included - but have not been limited to - time, thoughts, turn-taking, stories, songs, play, toys, nature, knowledge, skills, home, meals, exploration, and emotions. Each shared experience may enable us to contribute to co-constructing our grandchildren's development emotionally, socially and cognitively (Gordon, 2005; Schaffer, 1992; Tomasello, 1995); however, they are also teaching me a new appreciation of the tremendous value of human connection, belonging and empathy.

Lesson 6 - prioritising children - is my grandchildren's most powerful lesson in terms of informing my professional work in education with children aged 0-8 years. My grandchildren teach me to follow their lead by attending to their needs, views, interests and preferences. Yet too often in formal early childhood education contexts, children are required to adjust to adult agenda. This is encouraged at macro-level where global policy for pre-primary education and early childhood development and care is framed and justified in terms of readiness for primary education (United Nations, 2015, 4.2). Whilst this United Nations policy may persuade governments to invest in early childhood education, it fosters the teacher-directed early childhood pedagogy that we see in many countries (Schleicher, 2019; Urban, 2015). This didactic model risks increasing young children's anxiety in ways that hinder their well-being and development, in turn diminishing potential for academic achievement, and ultimately lifetime outcomes (Center on the Development Child, 2024; Jimerson, Durbrow, Adam, Gunnar & Bozoky, 2006; Nystad, Drugli, Lydersen, Lekhal and Buøen, 2022; Parent, Lupien, Herba, Dupéré, Gunnar, & Séguin, 2019). Child-centred early childhood pedagogy that values and attends to young children's authentic needs, views, interests and preferences in contexts featuring relational and experiential learning and process-oriented programmes is a valuable alternative (Murray, 2017; Schleicher, 2019).

In summary...

The six lessons I set out above exemplify how my baby grandchildren are educating me about what matters during their crucially important early childhood years: it is a new type of early childhood education for me, though I have been an early childhood educator for over forty years. When I am with my grandchildren, I want to do - and do - nothing other than focus on them, their needs, views, interests and preferences, and in that context, we learn together. I find the early childhood education my grandchildren are giving me to be joyous, rich and enlightening. Yet these experiences need not be confined to interactions between grandparents and their grandchildren. They can also constitute high quality experiences in formal early childhood education. Educators who focus on and attend closely to what matters to each child, following their lead, are creating rich learning contexts not only for children, but also for themselves. By valuing children in this way, early childhood educators cherish them and nurture their capabilities in ways that will benefit us all for years to come.

Introduction to articles in this International Journal of Early Years Education issue:

Each of the fifteen articles in this issue of *International Journal of Early Years Education* focuses on children and their interests, views, needs and preferences in different early education contexts across the World. Authors Erwin, Valentine and Toumazou from the United States of America (USA) open the issue with their article 'The Study of Belonging in Early Childhood: Complexities and Possibilities', followed by Backman's 'Shadow in children's picturebooks: Highlighting children's perspectives' from Sweden. 'Pretend play of young children in the Malaysian context' by Shamsudin, Kadar, Mohd, Hanif, Brown, Bacotang and Dzainudin, and, from Kazakhstan, Ajodhia and Cohen Miller's 'Can arts-informed pedagogy facilitate communities of learning and belonging for minoritized early years children?' An integrative review of research' come next. A second article from the USA - 'Fostering Metacognitive Skills in Young Children' (Mushi) is followed by a contribution from Turkey: 'The Psychological Well-Being of Children Who Play Digital Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic', authored by Atan, then Ekström and Cekaite's 'Children's Touch In a Swedish Preschool: Touch cultures in peer group interaction'. New Zealand authors Edwards and Fabian bring us 'Ngā Akoranga pai o te Tuhinga Pūrākau. Lessons about the heart of Learning Stories', then from Greece, authors Nikolopoulou, Fili, Founta and Starakis contribute 'Kindergarten students' and pre-service teachers' perceptions

regarding the frequency of the Moon's appearance at night'. An article from Oman is next: 'Early language and culture development in the social context of an Arab home: Multimodal practices' is authored by Salmi and Gelir. 'Meaning-making in an intergenerational project: a dialogic narrative analysis of young children's interactions with older adults' from United Kingdom authors Lyndon and Moss, then 'Understanding Analytical Drawings of Preschool Children: The Importance of a Dialog with a Child' by Slovenia's Selan, Podobnik and Jerman follow. From the USA, an article by Muller, Naples, Cannon, Haffner and Mullins explores 'How an Integrated Arts Program Facilitated Social and Emotional Learning in Young Children with Social Cognition Challenges', then Timmons, Bozek and Sharp contribute 'A Pan-Canadian document analysis: Examining policies and practices that foster self-regulation in the early years'. Authors based in Germany and Ireland provide the final article in this issue: 'Children's perspectives on quality in ECEC as a specific form of participation' (Macha, Urban, Lonnemann, Wronski and Hildebrandt).

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