

RESPECTFUL INFANT CARE—a summary of our professional development day with Toni and Robin Christie (New Zealand) Written by Candice Wagener candice.wagener99@gmail.com

All we really want is for our kids to be happy, but we have different ideas about what that looks like and how it's achieved. For Toni and Robin Christie, a New Zealand-based couple changing the face of early childhood abroad, that picture involves a lot of respect and consideration, something they are trying to promote worldwide because of its success in their home country.

The UW Office of Child Care and Family Resources recently hosted the Christies for a two-day event (May 19-20, 2014) which included an all-day professional seminar focused around respectful care in infancy (0-3), respectful communication among teammates within an early childhood center setting and some innovative ideas about playscapes that the Christies have implemented.

While New Zealand now has very reputable early childhood programs in place, Toni Christie can remember a time when she would come home crying because of the conditions children were spending their day in.

At a time when more infants than ever are being placed in child care settings, Christie says it is imperative that we get on board with the model of respectful care.

"Care is our curriculum with babies," says Christie, who advises against the trend in the "push-down effect," teaching more complex ideas younger and younger.

Christie lists seven key elements to respectful infant care:

1. Avoid unnecessary intervention – allow the child freedom to move and explore on their own, letting them be in a comfortable position. No containers, no tummy time, just natural movement created by the child himself. "Every child develops through milestones naturally—they don't need any intervention from adults," says Christie.
2. Establish a key teacher system – it is crucial that young children have consistent caregivers to ensure that their needs will be met as fully as possible.
3. Invite and wait for a response – Christie encourages caregivers use an open hand approach when inviting children to a transition such as a diaper change or meal time. Let the baby be in charge of the situation by watching for their cues.
4. Peaceful observation – it is important for caregivers to give infants their space to develop on their own, but still be nearby and not too busy to assist when needed. "Stop the glorification of busy," says Christie, "it's actually not all that clever."
5. Offer choices – even the youngest children appreciate having a say in the manner, so to speak. It is important to respect a child's ability to make choices by offering them acceptable options in each situation.
6. Slow down and throw away the clock – we need to foster children's "compassionate sense of wonder," according to Christie.
7. Team approach – the caregivers in a child's life need to work collaboratively to make sure that child's needs are being met and that child is receiving the best care they possibly can.

Children are very competent, capable individuals and our job as caregivers is to be mindful and respectful of that. In the end, it is all about the attachment we form.

"Life is a series of relationships and that's all," comments Christie, adding to the weight of our responsibility in maintaining one of the very first relationships young children will establish.