
Interview with Sharon Smith

In this interview, Dr Vicki Hargraves talks with Sharon Smith about infant and toddler education and care.

Sharon Smith is principal of Magic Child (<http://www.magicchild.co.nz>), an Infant and Toddler Consultancy, working alongside and supporting parents and early childhood professionals and working with teaching teams and centres in New Zealand and Australia. She is a RIE® Associate who teaches the RIE® Foundations™, Parent-Infant Guidance™, and Before Baby™ courses. She trained at the Pikler Institute in 2008 and 2012.

Sharon is a founding trustee and Chair of New Zealand Infant and Toddler Consortium (www.nzitc.co.nz), a charitable trust set up to empower the carers of very young children around an Educaring® Approach.

She is passionate advocate for putting the quality into the care, and enjoys supporting others to lay the foundations with children that are critical in supporting the natural curiosity within us all.

V: I'm here with Sharon Smith. She's the principal of Magic Child, which is an Infant and Toddler Consultancy. So she's involved on a daily basis, supporting parents, and early-years teachers, professionals and early childhood centres across New Zealand and Australia with their infant and toddler practices. She has trained at the Pikler Institute in 2008 and 2012, and so she brings a particularly rich understanding of RIE® philosophy to our discussion today. Welcome Sharon.

S: Thank you very much.

V: Sharon, I know that you are a keen advocate of the RIE® principles as a foundation for teacher's practices with infants and toddlers. So, let's start by discussing those. What are some of the values or principles that you suggest should guide an infants and toddlers teachers' work?

S: Well, I guess, as a RIE® Associate, a lot of my work is geared towards sharing an "Educaring®" approach with parents and teachers, who are in group care as well. I guess, what underpins this approach, as a foundation, is respect. And when we think about respect, it's respect for the infant, but it's also respect for yourself. So, one of the things that – because respect might look different to me as it does to you – and so, in that shared setting, it's important that we can actually unpack what respect is. What does it look like, what does it feel like? And have that kind of shared understanding and consistency in the practice. Magda Gerber talks about respect as being, you know, we don't just respect babies, you know, we demonstrate our respect for them every time we have an interaction with them. So, what we take out of that is that respecting means treating even those youngest of individuals as unique human beings as opposed to an object. So, that is a key kind of underlying foundation of this approach.

V: And I guess that means that teachers should be looking into every interaction and really examining how it enacts respect or not. It sounds like it could be quite a complex undertaking.

S: Yes, absolutely, because we often take so much for granted in the simplest of interactions with children. And so, if we think about – you know, what goes hand in hand with respect – and one of the first principles, basic trust. For that child to be an initiator and an explorer and a self-learner, that child is also needing to feel safe and secure. And so, the trust that they are learning, not only for themselves, but also the trust in the person who is there, who is caring for them. So, that comes with how they are spoken to, how they are handled. So, when we are talking about understanding what that interaction looks like... So, it takes into account you, as the adult who is there, caring if you like, but also that child who is there responding to that, and being paid attention to, and being a part of that care.

So some of the things that we can think about with regards to all of that. It's really interesting to unpack an interaction, you know, but one of the first things we might suggest is for you to just slow yourself down, so that you can really be focused and pay attention to what it is that you are actually doing with that child. And from that child's perspective, you are actually communicating with them. You are letting them know what is about to happen and then you give them some time to process that. So you're holding that space. And while you are doing that you are waiting for a response. And that can be as small as a bodily movement or something like that, depending on the child's age and how well you know them and how well you can tune in to their cues, to understand that sort of dialogue that is going on. And then, when you are there, you are able to give that child your undivided attention and be really present in that moment, as you look at each other and work out whatever it is you are going to do, for example. So, even if we think "well, I'm going to pick that baby up", you know in your head that you are going to pick that baby up, but what is that going to be like for the baby who has no idea that you are about to come swooping in to pick that baby up, you know? So, we kind of stop, un-busy ourselves, take that breath and be very mindful, and intentional if you like, in that process of "I'm coming down to your level, I'm moving slowly...". You know, I'm going to say "I need to pick you up", and you offer your open body language, that they can receive it and respond to it. And then you can pick them up. And then you do that even with... In a slow way, because we don't want that young baby to lose their sense of bodily cohesion, you know – that's that safety and security again that if they are there in your arms, they can feel safe, because they are relaxed in their body and they are there with you. You know, those sorts of things. So, it's amazing and it's fascinating and it's very "present", you know, when you're there.

V: Absolutely. And I think the time that you've picked up on would be very crucial, wouldn't it? That being hurried would lead to quite a different experience. And I imagine that teachers can quite often feel hurried, so this is quite a challenge.

S: Absolutely. For sure. And the sorts of things that impact on that, I suppose, well, how many children are there that you are responsible for? And if there is a big group then you are less likely to be focused and able to slow yourself down. And have that real one-on-one time when you need it, because your mind is actually thinking, you know, it's really hard for you to be fully present if you're worried about what else is going on out there in the room. Those sorts of things. So, as a team, you know, I guess one of the important aspects of ways in which you can create an environment that has that focus to allow you to be fully present during those times that you really want to be is a primary care model. So, you can be – and that supports that security, particularly with very young children – where you can be that go-to or that main person who provides for that child's primary needs. Sometimes that gets a bit confused because of the wording, and so I know that centres talk about key teacher, but the premise is the same. That you can be that go-to for the parents, as a main voice, communicator about what's going on in the centre, what's been happening with your child, how you bring the parents... discussions about the child from the night before, etc. So, you've got that continual dialogue with them, that you can continue to share.

In the room, you don't operate on your own, though, because you can't be there all the time. And so, you have to rely on that team dynamic. Usually, you have like a tag-partner who can be there as a backup for you, to provide that care if you happen not to be there. So, primary care, unpacking that as a team is really important. It takes a bit of preparation, if you're shifting to it for the first time, it does take a bit of readjustment. There's a mind shift there, around building the relationships, really. So Educaring® is a relationship-based model, and that is one of the key components towards it.

The thing that makes it very effective as well is, ideally, you have small groups. So, again, if you happen to be in a place where there are large numbers of very young children, that can be very overwhelming, not just for you, but for the children as well. And so, part of that primary care-giving model helps to break it down into small groups as well. Because, ideally you would be working with maybe – and it depends on the age, I guess – but with very young children, maybe in groups of six, maximum – and I guess the ratios come in here – with a 1-to-3 ratio. So you might have, for maybe up to eight months, six children in a group, so that is two adults with six children for that very young group. As they are starting to get a bit more mobile and more active and exploring, that ratio, I think, is important to stay the same, about 1 to 3, but maybe you could have a few more children, so maybe a group of 8 or 9 would be good. And then, as you're getting a bit older then, you could have a few more children, maybe a group of 10 to 12 and your ratio might be able to go to 1 to 4. But that's very different of course to what our regulations suggest. And I see those as a minimum. That gives a minimum requirement. One of the things about the RIE® principles is that we want to foster quality and so, I would always advocate that, if you can get a smaller group, then work out how you can actually make that work for you, because at the end of the day it makes life so much more acceptable, really, while you're there with young children, for that relationship to grow. So, you're creating, you're responsible for that environment and the ambiance, as part of all of that.

V: Yes, and would you consider that it ties in with this idea of approaching children very slowly and having almost a synergy in terms of they understand that've had the same teacher or teachers approaching them to pick them up before, they come to know these kind of interactions and they come to know what to expect – and also teachers can get to know how children do offer cues back to them. Obviously, if you're caring for a large number of children that could be much more complex, to be able to study and learn the cues of each child.

S: Most definitely. Part of that, you know, going through all the, as they're there, growing with you, one of those other preferred policies, if you like, is the idea of a continuity of care so that begins with that primary model and then, for the children, ideally – so we're talking, so this curriculum is an infant and toddler curriculum, so up to about the age of 3 – if that cohort of children can go, so depending on your centre, if you're changing rooms – or you could change the environment actually, is the other option there children are expected to move along, different room, different people.

V: You're suggesting perhaps keeping the room, but changing the room layout. Interesting.

S: Yeah, that's definitely an option. Or, what you can do with – when we're talking about that consistency and care – there's that key person, out of one room, who might go with that cohort of children, to enable that familiarity. It also supports, because children, you know, feel that sense of loss, as do the kaiako who are there – they have that, and the families feel it too – it becomes such a norm for us, for children, just to say “oh, you're this age now, let's move you into the new room”, but again, if we can put that child at the centre, and take their perspective, and if we're talking about relationship-based pedagogy, then it's a mind shift in how we might think about ways in which we continue to support that relationship over that incredibly critical period of that child's life.

V: Sharon, we've talked quite a lot about these values of respect and trust for children, and lots of ways in which these can be enabled. Do you think sometimes these values need to be considered, need to be interpreted differently in certain contexts? Do you think teachers need to take account of their context, the families that they support...?

S: Yeah, I think most definitely. We have different and diverse cultures that bring their children to our centres. One of the aspects around that, because in a centre, as well, you also have a philosophy about what your values are and why you think that is important with very young children. And, so, part of that process, perhaps, when families come, is to have that two-way partnership, that you're beginning that relationship with the families as well, and that is an understanding about that child who doesn't come in isolation, who comes because they are part of that family and all of the traditions that come with that. But also,

for the centre, it's important to be able to say that "these are also our centre values", I think, and that "we would work hard to be able to understand this child in the context of your family, just as much as it is important for you to understand why we might do certain practices here in that centre". And so, we might talk about, also, a gentle entry with parents and their children when they come in, which helps them understand the peaceful, calm environment that we are in, that's maybe not as over-stimulating as some environments can be and why that is important. We would ask parents to be comfortable and feel that this is a place that they want to bring their child to. As well as, take the opportunity to allow them over time – because we would want parents to come and visit quite a few times – to be able to transition that child into the centre. That's not just a... You know that takes some planning and commitment, to say "when you're here, this is how we can get to know who that key teacher might be", perhaps that relationship could begin then. It varies, some of this you know. "But we would also like you to be able to feed your baby when you're here so we can see, if you're not breastfeeding, how you go about giving your baby your bottle, so we can learn from you about what you do when you do that, how you might change a nappy." Depending on the child's age, how they're able to sit at a table and eat. You know, those sorts of things.

So, we have all of those transitional threads, if you like, over time, that not only help the child to be familiar in this new environment, but for parents also to get a feel for what is this centre and why would I want to bring my child here. That we can share the philosophy that we share and, also, the child gets to see that adult and that parent interacting together and, you know, beginning that trustful relationship as well, which is very important. So, you know, there are many advantages at different levels for all concerned, really. Again, importantly, you've got to have an open, trusting relationship with that parent, so that when things need to be discussed, whoever that person is who wants to convey that information can do so and feel comfortable and that you're there in support of each other, if you like.

V: That's really interesting, because I'm wondering when you invite a parent to share their practices, their caregiving practices with you, what would a teacher do if the family or community practices that, like you say, accompany this child are sort of quite in conflict with the centre's philosophies? So, for example, if a nappy change is done in a less respectful and more hurried way and given as an example of "this is how we change nappies at home", how would a teacher respond to that?

S: So I guess that's just an observation that the teacher can make. The idea isn't to pass a judgment, or anything like that. It's just to grow an awareness of that. What the parent might come to know in time, if they happen to be there when the caregiver is there changing a nappy, is that... yeah, so something like that might look a little bit different and could be intriguing for them, because maybe it might not ever have occurred. Because often with nappy changing that is the way, you know, people like to do it quickly, because, you know, the objective isn't to spend the time over the nappy change. The objective is to get it done so they can move on.

V: And possibly they think that the infant wants it done and out of the way as well. You know, "let's get this done as quickly as possible for the benefit of both of us".

S: Yeah, and so, in Educaring® the focus is a little bit different, because we actually see that time as a really important opportunity to grow the relationship. So, the nappy will get changed, but the interaction is part of that, you know, which looks very different to a hurried one.

V: So, I hear that you are saying that the most important thing is to have an open and trusting relationship with parents and clearly criticising any aspect of their parenting would jeopardise that entirely. So, it's much more of a modelling approach.

S: Yes, most definitely. And it is, you know, it's very similar – even something like – cause one of the aspects around this approach is to allow a freedom of movement for the child. So, that is that the child isn't contained as such, so we wouldn't put a child into a bouncer or anything like that, because we want them....., and it's important for their physical development and growth that they can actually move freely. And so, I remember being at a centre where we were explaining that actually we didn't have high chairs, that the babies would be fed on our lap, as an example. And the mother said "oh, I don't think that that would be possible because...", you know, "I just can't envisage what that would be like". And so, we said "ok, well, let us see how we go and if it really isn't going to work, then maybe we can..." – you know, she was saying "I want to bring my high chair for the child" and so it was a matter of seeing is believing, if you like. So, we were able to model that, saying "well, actually, this is how we do it and the child is actually accepting this really well". That was kind of a way of modelling, as an example for the parents' idea of something and then the way it might look slightly different in the centre. You know, that kind of thing.

V: It is quite a different way of looking at infancy and the way, the right way that adults should provide for infancy. This is quite different and will be quite new to a lot of families.

S: Yeah, absolutely. I think, also, sometimes even with educators it can be, particularly around allowing children to move freely, to take risks with equipment that are there for them, because maybe they have been taught that they need to teach children how to do things. So, again, that's a mind shift to say "well, if we can kind of create that environment where we might have a safe environment, first off, of course, and then let the child be the director, the script writer and the actor in their "play", in their exploration. That again, can create some very interesting observation, because often we feel that we have to be involved to help them learn, but sometimes we learn as we observe or have to teach, I should say. So, when we can observe children, we can actually learn so much about how they play, how they are thinking is structured, what are some of those schemas or working theories that are coming out as part of that exploration. So again, just a different way of being with children and letting them - we can work out what they are learning from our observation of them.

V: So, in what ways would teachers be able to support children's learning? You sort of talked then about what things a teacher might notice. Would you then see that there was a role for a teacher to respond to that? So, like you say, not directly teaching, what would the response be in noticing something about a child's interests or development?

S: So, in the way in which they are manipulating objects, for example. So initially, what we have in the environment ideally are open-ended objects, in which children can, as they are learning holistically, taking things in, grasping things, tasting things, working out what they are – so, we would perhaps be able to have similar types of objects, but maybe made of different materials, so they might be exploring what is "in" or what is "out", on the outside, how they might be putting things in or taking things out, or putting things on top. You know, just actually watching their schematic process in that exploration. And I think the other thing that you will notice when you get the opportunity to be observing, is how the exploration has a continuity within it. So, when you do have the opportunity to document that and talk about that as a means of assessing their learning, if you were to look at their portfolio over time, I guess you would be able to identify some of that continuity going all the way through. So, in the environment, I always say, perhaps rather than looking at ways to extend, I say first try to broaden it, broaden that learning, because the child will come up with many other ways to manipulate things based on where they are at.

V: So, in terms of providing different recourses that you think the child will find interesting based on the way they've been exploring the objects you've already provided?

S: Yeah, definitely. And, of course, as they become more mobile, physically mobile, they are also still working out how their bodies work and how to organise their being in order to climb over something, or get into something. And so, plenty of opportunity for that uninterrupted play and uninterrupted freedom of movement to allow them those challenges, because they always will, you know, [being] 'wired for mastery' of course, and so you see how they will happily fall off something and then just turn around and try it again, you know, because that's inbuilt in their own sense of "I want to get this". That's what's interesting for them. And sometimes we can, we might interfere with that if we feel that they are, that we could help them achieve that, but that's a different sort of, you know, innate motivation that's already there, that inner-directedness that we can allow to come out, that creates a much more positive, sort of, attitude that they are building about themselves, along with those dispositional things like perseverance and resilience, if you like. All of those things. That's all there if we allow it to happen. Most definitely.

V: As you were talking – and I loved your phrase of 'wired for mastery' – but as we were talking just now, I thought there was a huge connection there with *Te Whāriki* and the learning dispositions that we can cultivate, and part, I suppose, of this lack of involvement is about cultivating those dispositions. Is that how you would...

S: Absolutely. I think Educaring® is so very well embedded within *Te Whāriki* and it offers many interesting reflective questions that, again, we can use to keep our reflective practice open and transparent and hopefully have those conversations with each other, because we're not there in isolation either. You know, we're there caring for the children and we're also caring for ourselves and caring for our colleagues, you know, in that day-to-day, so we want to create a positive spiral, if you like, to support everything that goes on in that centre. So, and I think it comes through even in the principles of *Te Whāriki* – that is really important on a, kind of, umbrella level. Just like the RIE foundations, they are these as those principles that support how we can live that learning if we can tune ourselves into it. That's definitely...

V: And both approaches, if you like what *Te Whāriki* advocates and the RIE principles, both depend on teachers interpreting, you know, the principle base is about teachers interpreting, reflecting on their practice in relation to those principles, and so, I wondered if... What sort of questions do you think teachers need be thinking about in regards to infant and toddler care? Particularly, the relationships that they build with infants. How can teachers reflect upon those in order find out ways they can improve their relationship with infants and toddlers?

S: I think, ongoing, open communication as a team, to support your own self-awareness about what goes on for you in those moments where, so for example, hopefully when you have your staff meetings, that you can use that as an opportunity to really unpack the children that are there and the way in which you come to know them. Because everyone who might be observing that child will see something different, and so, to have an opportunity to talk about that is really important.

As an individual, when you're there, I did a really, what I thought was a really interesting action research project some years ago at a centre around that very theme, actually. About how do we as different people, different levels of experience, education experience, life experience, come and be guided by these principles? And what does that look like at the end result? And some of those sorts of questions focussed around just growing your own awareness. What are the things that you actively are aware of to make connections with that child, as an example? And probably frame it in a care moment, so when you are in that care moment, because ideally that's a time when you can really slow yourself down and tune in and have full active attention. And then, on a reflective side, to discuss what do you think the benefits of something like those moments are for the child? You know, what is the child learning, and then how we can couch that in terms of, you know, what is healthy, secure attachment and why is that important and those sorts of things?

Even the use of that primary care model: What do you notice? Cause often, if you haven't been used to that and you've just shifted to that, you'll see some different..., you'll feel how different that is and be able to articulate what that is, recognise it and talk about it, you know. Because sometimes, with that, people think "Oh, I'm a bit worried that child is getting too attached to me" and those sorts of conversations and so that helps understand what is that healthy, secure attachment about and, just like with the parent, if you might have to leave and that child gets upset, actually that's a sign that that child has some sort of connection with you, you know, it's not that "oh, now they're starting to be dependent on me". So, it sort of shifts those sorts of dialogues as well, to help understand that a little bit deeper...

What else? As you're there modelling with them, when you think about how you provide care, so we talk about... it's that voice, it's how we're looking at each other, being aware of our touch, which is so important, and so, because sometimes we're not even aware of our touch and we just might move a part of a child's body or things like that without really thinking about it. Sometimes it just heightens that awareness and gives us that fluid sensitivity to how we are with them. So, things like that, it really enhances our own self-awareness and with our colleagues as well. So, we can have conflict - but conflict is healthy as well - and work on ways in which we can work through things in a professional dynamic way, rather than the other ways that can then start to create toxic relationships, which then plays out when we're there with the children. So, it all filters through at the end of the day.

So I think first off, it starts with yourself, and hopefully you're there with a team who can talk about things and work through things and revisit, cause it's very important to go back and revisit, cause our brains are organised to just get back to that automatic mode, so sometimes we have to catch ourselves and stop ourselves and slow ourselves down again because, all of a sudden, we are not fully present or as present as we think we are. You know, those sorts of things.

And I guess, what else can I share there? A big part of this approach is to be present and be able to acknowledge and let children express their emotions. So sometimes that can be tricky for adults because it might trigger something for us, or we might just be uncomfortable about that. So, what we do is try to get the child to stop crying or not be angry, which is again a mind shift in that way we can respond to them to let them work through their own emotions. And they get through it and get over it pretty quickly, but sometimes it still sits with us. You know, things like that are really important, to work out what is your trigger point, if you like? Are you aware of what that is? Where does that come from for you? To work on your own stuff as well. That's always important.

V: And Sharon, do you think that some of these reflections that teachers have as they consider... – earlier in your answer you talked about how looking at what a caregiving moment might mean for a child and what they're learning from this caregiving moment, what their response is – are those aspects that could feed into children's documentation and their portfolios and things, cause that's quite a new idea for me. That documentation could be about relationship, about the caregiving rather than the cognitive side of how they manipulate objects, for example.

S: Yeah, absolutely, and I think I was mentioning before, as we model this Educaring® for the child, that wonderful term that Magda Gerber coined that relates to, you know, through the care, first and foremost, particularly with very young babies, they're learning about the world, through the way in which, you know, they are playing a part in it. And everything that happens to them is their self-view, world-view, that when you have that respectful and peaceful environment, where you can allow children to be who they are, you see that being modelled through the play and through what the children do, and how they are with each other, you know, so that's a really powerful tool and very, absolutely, I would encourage documenting that side. So, the educaring, they're not [separate]..., they're intertwined. So, through the care, that child is learning, is being educated, if you like, about themselves and the way in which they can be in the world. So, it's not separate even, it's very much intertwined, just like how the learning is holistic, but we choose to break it down and put it into parts.

V: Well, thank you Sharon. Thank you for this interesting discussion today. And I feel that, we started off talking about respect as a key principle, and trust being involved in that too, and then the complexity of what that means for early childhood education and how it impinges on every aspect of the kind of decisions that we make for children in early childhood education, so powerful, so I'd like to thank you for that. Is there anything in closing that you'd like to offer as advice for teachers of very young children?

S: I think if there's one thing that you can do is just to try and slow yourself down and give yourself some time and space, so you can observe and just see what that child can do for themselves that's a great place to start I think.

V: Thank you. Thank you very much for joining us today and sharing your wisdom.

S: Thank you.