

# raising with respect

By Miriam McCaleb\*

**Most parents expect their children to grow up showing respect for others. But, as Miriam McCaleb explains, we need to treat our babies with respect from day one and lead by example, in order for them to fully learn its true meaning.**

If you were to think back over the interactions you've had over the past few days – workmates, whānau, the guy at the petrol station – the ones that leave you feeling warmest and most affirmed are probably those that have included some respect.

My work with groups of parents gives me confidence to suggest that if you were telling me the qualities you'd like your children to have as they grow, you would doubtlessly include the word "respect".

So how do we encourage our children to be respectful? Old school wisdom would insist that children respect their elders. But how do children learn to do so? We know that simply saying something to a child doesn't magically make it happen (as my daughter's messy bedroom would attest).

Nowadays, we have brain science in our corner as we contemplate how children learn. And early brain development teaches us how repeated experiences wire up brains. Our early experiences do a lot for creating our "habits of mind". For example, if we are usually spoken to kindly, we learn to speak to others kindly.

So, if we want children to know how to be respectful and give respect, they need to experience respect, and to observe, hear and feel a relationship that is based around respect. That means, in order to have a child who respects their elders, they need to have been respected themselves. They need to know what a respectful relationship looks and sounds like, from the inside out.

What? Respecting babies and children? This is a new concept for many. Besides, how do we do that? It can be helpful to think about what respecting a baby means and what child respect looks like. One activity to try is an imagination game. Take a moment during a care routine: perhaps you're putting your infant son into his pyjamas. Take a second to imagine that the tiny baby is old-lady-you or old-man-you, and the person doing the dressing is your grown-up son. How would you want to be handled? How does it feel when your hand is grabbed roughly or touched gently? What tone of voice is he using?



**Not passing judgement, not rushing her, not half-attending as you impatiently wait for your turn to talk. Just listening.**



These seemingly unimportant acts of dressing, bathing, and feeding infants – these care interactions – can be an amazing tool for cementing for your baby what respect looks and feels like. These are a time for practising respect; they are things we have to do every day anyway. Some estimates suggest that you'll change 2000-3000 nappies before your child is finished with them. Decide: would you like to use the nappy-changing time to slow down, connect, and strengthen your bond, or will you be half-present and rushed? Will you be talking to Baby, or someone else?

Our ever-increasing understanding of how humans develop and how our brains grow just keeps reinforcing that nothing is more important for learning than connected relationships. Also, the more we have a particular experience, the more our brains will set it as our autopilot.

## showing respect

Pennie Brownlee is a writer and educator based in Thames. She is one of New Zealand's most respected teachers about matters of infant respect. In a recent blog post about the subject, Pennie elegantly describes how a respectful care interaction might go: "I want to put this sleeve on. Will you give me your hand?" and very lightly tap your baby's hand with your finger so that she has another clue from you, and then wait while she processes your request. "I am going to take your hand and pop it in this sleeve" and wait before you do it. It won't be too many weeks before the baby puts her hand into yours. It's true! I have seen this with my own eyes: babies who are just a few weeks old and can actively participate in their care.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of people – including folks who ought to know better – who run on an unknowing autopilot of disrespect to babies. Babies' youth and inexperience makes folks tempted to treat them like they're stupid, and their non-mobility and malleability seems to make some adults think that they can be manipulated and manhandled at the whim of the grown-up.

Luckily, it's never too late to inject a little more respect into our daily lives. Whether our children are watching us with our own parents, or a random lady at the library, we might ask ourselves, "Is this how I'd like my child to behave?"

Similarly, we can always strive to be mindful during interactions with our children, whether baby, toddler or big kid. Give it a try: when you collect your daughter from school and she's full of the (seemingly petty!) tales from the playground, take a few minutes to really listen. Not passing judgement, not rushing her, not half-attending as you impatiently wait for your turn to talk. Just listening.

Or have a go at a super slow and focused interaction as you get your baby changed from his pyjamas into his clothes for the day. Use lots of eye contact, a warm tone, and keep involving him. Remember, some day he might be the one helping you to get dressed. How would you want that interaction to go?

*\* Writer Miriam McCaleb does her darndest to stay respectful in her interactions with her husband and daughters. Some days, she even succeeds! Her website [www.baby.geek.nz](http://www.baby.geek.nz) is a wonderland of resources for thinking parents.*

**For more information on this important topic, look for books by Magda Gerber, and everyone needs Pennie Brownlee's lovely book "Dance With Me In the Heart". Find it at [penniebrownlee.weebly.com](http://penniebrownlee.weebly.com).**

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