

Trust me, I know what I am doing.

The baby's sacred quest for competence

I do not use these words lightly, when babies quest to express the potential that Life has encoded into them, that is a sacred act. One of the child's recognised basic needs is to grow in competence: competence in loving and relating, competence in moving and balancing, competence in talking and helping ... and we adults play a pivotal role in how successful the Little Quester will be.

Thanks, but no thanks

You know when you are doing something that you have chosen to do, you are engrossed and someone comes along and wants to 'help' you? Somehow the satisfaction of sticking with it and working it out all by yourself suddenly disappears. As adult questers we can say "*thanks for your help, but no thanks. I want to work this out all by myself.*" Babies can't, and neither should they have to.

Twenty (incompetent) questions

Is she sleeping through the night yet? Can he sit up yet? Can she crawl yet? Is he swimming yet? Is he standing yet? Is she walking yet? Is he running yet? Is she writing her name yet? Is he reading yet? Running marathons? Climbing Everest?... Oh the pressure, for both the child and the parent.

What is the hurry?

What bought us to this sorry state of affairs where we **expect** from children what they are **not able to do**? Worse, because we are so focussed on the next milestone (that we know about), we miss what our children **can** do, and **are** doing right under our noses. In our rush to have our babies upright we 'help' them when they do not need it. If we had a better idea about the choreography Nature has encoded into human babies we would know there was no hurry. We would trust that babies **will** go from prone to vertical in their own time, and we would know how to support them in this sacred quest.

The quest for sitting

Sitting provides a good example of the ways we unwittingly undermine babies in their questing. Almost every adult in New Zealand expects babies to sit when the babies can't even roll over by themselves, or get onto their knees by themselves. Both of these achievements are necessary 'steps' in the quest to sit.

Not knowing this, adults do not give babies enough floor time on their backs to accomplish these skills **by themselves**. Adults 'help' them by placing them on their tummies and, even more damaging, by 'plonking' the baby into the sitting position. Competence in sitting is now out of the question.

It's a sitter Babe

When this propping-to-sit first happens, without a cushion as a backstop the baby topples over and bangs his or her head. The baby is not imprinting 'competence' in this situation, quite the reverse. Where there would have been pure joy at sitting unaided, there is, instead, fright and tears.

After a while the baby learns to bend forward to avoid the crash. In this position it is hard to breathe with ease, and it also takes a lot of effort calling into play muscles which are not ready for the task. From this precarious position - which they did not get into and cannot get out of - they have to deal with the inbuilt urge to explore their world with their hands and their mouths.

Not wanting to risk toppling or crashing the baby will sit frustrated. The perfect posture all children can achieve by following inbuilt human choreography is cancelled out for this baby. It is true that the propped baby is out of the way and out of 'mischief', but is this the best we can offer blossoming intelligence?

After some weeks, or even months, in this position 'bum-shuffling' is the clever baby's way out of this conundrum. This is the baby's way to follow the **inbuilt** urge to move, and to satisfy the **inbuilt** urge to explore anything that looks interesting. Bum-shuffling is a perfect example of an un-natural adaption because of our interference in the natural unfolding of the babies growth. We help and interfere not with malice, but because we don't know enough about child development. If we did, we would never put a baby down in any position other than **on the back**.

How lucky is that!

Extremely fortunate are the babies who are allowed to learn to roll unaided, to get onto their tummies unaided, to creep then crawl unaided, to sit unaided, to stand unaided, to walk unaided, to balance unaided. They are imprinting competence at that deep neurological-cellular-psychological level.

Competence embodied

These lucky babies who have been allowed to exercise their competence have it firmly 'em-**body**-ed'. They have a working understanding of the steps and qualities which lead to competence. These babies know that it will take effort, patience and stickability. They know that there will be times of frustration but that if you keep at it you will get there in the end. They also know the joy of achievement after effort, and all of this will stand them in good stead for the rest of their lives.

Can I help you?

These babies, on their quest for competence, will soon want to help **you**. I know there's an irony in this, but not too long after they have got mastery over their marvellous bodies they will want to help with the dishes, with the cooking, and with the gardening because these are the new challenges they see around them. Your response to them when they want to help you is a big decider in **whether they learn to consider themselves competent** or not.

Learning takes time, remember?

Put yourself in the same situation for a moment with, say, a computer. A person who is a great computer teacher does not do it for you. That is no help at all. They support you, they are patient, they explain things - more than once if you don't quite get it the first time. And they let you do it, yourself, without any pressure. They let you make mistakes and try again because they understand that that is how you learn. And in no time at all you do learn. You become competent, and importantly, you know you are competent.

You can also tell if the person with the knowledge has no patience. You know very well if they think it would be quicker and easier for them to do it themselves. Such a person doesn't make you feel all that great, and they certainly don't make you feel competent. Because you are an adult you don't have to stay around such people but children don't have a choice. If parents keep toddlers from helping because they think they can do it better and quicker themselves, they are inadvertently doing **incompetence** training. The worst outcome of this scenario, if it is repeated, is that the child sees themselves as incompetent. The axiom "what you see is what you get" holds true in this instance: people live up to - or down to - the view they have of themselves. This is true even when that view is unconscious.

So if I don't help what do I do?

You do what you would like done for yourself in the same situation of being alongside someone who has more competence than you. You look for ways that you can support your child to do it for themselves:

- **You are alongside your child as they quest.**
You are the person who loves and believes in them. Even though every child has to undergo the quest on their own, they need someone who loves and believes in them so that they eventually learn to love and believe in themselves. This is the biggest gift you can give your child.
- **You trust them and let them do it** - instead of doing it for them.
- **You trust them and let them work out *how* to do it** - instead of always showing them how to do it.
You can ask the kind of questions which lead the young child to work out ways that **would** work, "*What would happen if you turned it over the other way?*"
- **You trust them and wait and see** - rather than rushing in to the rescue.
"*I can see it's really frustrating trying to get back off your tummy*" and you let them keep trying until it is almost too much. "*I will put you onto your back now but you'll be able to do it yourself soon.*"
- **You trust them and acknowledge their emotions as they quest for competence.**
"*I can see that it is really frustrating getting the hang of those scissors but you have managed to cut two pieces already. Keep going and let me know when you would like me to finish the job for you.*"
- **Relax and enjoy being present as the Life which is encoded within your child unfolds.**

