

Lory Manrique-Hyland tries RIE, a US child-centred approach to rearing kids

Ditch the fancy toys

LIKE many of us these days, I have more time than cash and am always looking for free or affordable ways to entertain my children. After investigating RIE I now think all I really need is a bowl and some wooden spoons — let them entertain themselves.

RIE, pronounced “wry”, stands for Resources for Infant Educators. According to Deborah Solomon, executive director of the Los Angeles-based non-profit organisation, RIE wants to help parents raise “self-confident, self-reliant, co-operative children”. The foundation of the approach is respect for the child from infancy.

The RIE approach strives to understand baby’s point of view. One practice that has spurred discussion is not immediately lifting a crying baby, but pausing first to determine why they’re crying. Rocking, soothers and other means of manipulating them into silence are frowned upon.

RIE eschew expensive toys that light up and make noise. Solomon says: “The more active the toy, the more passive the child.” When I asked Solomon if there was an appropriate time to introduce plastic gismos that pop and make noise, she suggested, “Never”. Well, that’s Christmas sorted.

RIE also focuses on the development of gross motor skills. They don’t believe in putting babies into positions they can’t get out of on their own. This means no ‘tummy time’, no walkers, no Jumperoos and no propping babies into sitting positions. For young babies, a blanket on the floor will do, thank you very much. There’s another €150 saved.

RIE was founded in 1973 by Hungarian-born family therapist Magda Gerber, who immigrated to Los Angeles in the 1950s. She’d worked with paediatrician Dr Emmi Pikler in an orphanage in Hungary, where they put their approach to thousands of hours of scrutiny.

Today, parents are taught the method in weekly, 90-minute sessions for children from three months to three years. Educators are located across the USA, Canada and New Zealand.

Though there is no Irish centre for RIE, the Montessori method, with its focus on self-directed play, is closely allied. Many of the babies who attend RIE classes in LA subsequently attend Montessori pre-schools.

There are some parents in Ireland employing RIE. American Sarah Brown now lives in Dublin with her Irish husband and six-month-old daughter, Iris. She discovered RIE through her sister who lives in Los Angeles and attends classes with her toddler. Sarah is self-taught; she’s read *Your Self-Confident Baby* by Magda Gerber and looked up information online. She makes it a point to give Iris plenty of uninterrupted play time with simple objects. Iris’s favourite toy is currently a kitchen colander.

Sarah is on maternity leave, but is concerned about childcare options when the time comes. She’s lent her in-laws the RIE book and says, “Finding a creche with an RIE ethos — I don’t think it’ll happen. We visited a couple and it was all big plastic toys — lets entertain the babies, etc. We’ll probably try to find a babysitter who is open-minded to using this approach.”



BOWLED OVER: Lory Manrique-Hyland in Knockraha, Co Cork, with her sons Zach and Max. The RIE approach eschews the use of fancy toys and comforting dummies.

Picture: Denis Minihane.

Celebrities such as Helen Hunt, Tobey Maguire and Desperate Housewives star Felicity Huffman have attended RIE classes. Solomon puts this celebrity link down to the fact that the organisation is based in LA, so some of the hundreds of attendees will inevitably be actors.

Janet Lansbury, who acted and modelled under the name Janet Julian, notably starred as Nancy Drew in the 1970s TV show *The Hardy Boys/Nancy Drew Mysteries*. She’s now a certified RIE trainer and board member. In her blog, she mounts an active defence of celebrities attending RIE, stating that the approach requires an open mind and encourages creativity — therefore, creative people attend.

I set out to try RIE with my own children.

Max is two and Zach is five. Solomon assured me that I could use RIE with older infants. Her guidelines included: tell them what’s expected and understand how they feel about it. Give them a choice, as this helps them to maintain their dignity. Keep statements simple as they’re not listening after about five words anyway.

This is how it went in my house: I’d ask Max if I could change his nappy, and he’d answer, “No”. I would then explain that if I didn’t change it, he’d wet his trousers. He’d say no again. I’d sigh deeply and try not to think about having to rush off and collect Zach from school. After another minute or so of persuasion, I was actually able to pick Max up and change him without a fight.

Occasionally, the system broke down, for

RIE for beginners

- **RESPECT** your baby as an individual and communicate your intentions. Tell her when you want to pick her up, when it’s time for a change, time for a feed, etc. Talk her through these activities.

- Give the baby undivided attention during key care activities such as breastfeeding

- Give the baby space and time to discover the world. Don’t interrupt play. Don’t hover. Don’t show them how to play with objects.



- Use simple toys such as bowls and wooden blocks. Active toys make passive children.

- Don’t lay your baby on its tummy. Don’t prop her up to sit with cushions. She’ll do what comes naturally when she’s ready.

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example, when Zach was trying to use the potty in peace and Max was screaming.

I tried to calmly persuade Max to move out of the room, and then Zach started crying.

Finally, I just lifted Max kicking and yelling out of the bathroom. Sometimes, you have to take the nuclear approach.

RIE’s focus on self-directed, uninterrupted play with basic play things is a relief. You don’t have to spend money on fancy toys you just have to have respect for the child as an individual.

- To find out more go to www.rie.org. You can find practical examples at www.janetlansbury.com and at piklerexperience.blogspot.com

- For further insight, pick up a copy of *Dear Parent: Caring for Infants With Respect* by Magda Gerber