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The Secret Celebrity Parenting Craze

by *Gina Piccalo*

October 31, 2010 | 10:41pm

Move over L. Ron. Rejecting the trend of pressure-cooker, high-achievement-oriented development for their kids, some Hollywood power parents are embracing a back-to-basics approach that critics say has cult-like aspects. The parents, according to people familiar with the approach, include Tobey Maguire, Helen Hunt, Jamie Lee Curtis, Jason Alexander, Felicity Huffman and husband William H. Macy.

Modern American parenting can seem an extreme sport geared toward raising a bionic generation of high-achieving super-babies.

Even before they learn to walk, our infants are dragged to swimming lessons, “socialized” at baby “gyms” and plopped in front of videos that promise to have a 6-month-old reading English or, at the very least, understanding some Chinese. Relaxation is rare on this harried path.

But a little-known Los Angeles-based group with a devoted celebrity following is leading a backlash against these intense parenting efforts, attempting to slow life down to baby-speed.

RIE, short for Resources for Infant Educators and pronounced “wry,” eschews the conventions of American infancy from baby strollers, high chairs and battery-operated toys to excessive praise, forced sharing, and even lullabies. The end result, advocates say, is not just more competent and self-aware children, but a more peaceful world. This month, the method goes mainstream as RIE teaching materials arrive at 1,700 federally funded Early Head Start programs for families with infants and toddlers nationally.

Little-known outside academic circles, the RIE philosophy has spread among parents via word-of-mouth. It has its own tight-knit circle of instructors; its own rituals (the narration of the diaper change); its own spare aesthetic (no mirrors, no dangling mobiles, no Baby Einstein); and its own set of guidelines (no singing, no rocking, no playpens). All of this honors the baby’s “struggle” and builds a more “authentic self,” proponents believe. RIE toys are simple—a paisley scarf, a wooden spoon, a plastic colander—so as to stimulate imagination and motor skills. And baby days are calm; there’s no running multiple errands with the little one in tow.

These values have resonated with a cadre of Hollywood types. Tobey Maguire, Helen Hunt, Jamie Lee Curtis, *Seinfeld*’s Jason Alexander, and *Desperate Housewives*’ Felicity Huffman and her husband William H. Macy have all attended RIE baby groups or quietly turned to RIE educators over the years, according to parents and teachers who’ve practiced with them.

“Doing RIE” generally means showing respect for a baby’s experience. Parents narrate the action around the child—loud noises, new faces, movement from one room to another—to help the baby have “a thinking, feeling part of whatever you are doing to him and for him,” as the movement’s original manual states. A crying baby isn’t shushed

or distracted but is allowed to release the tension of feeling, and asked why he or she is crying.

“The potential is there from birth to own your feelings and express them and have them acceptable because the adults in your life aren’t afraid of them,” said longtime instructor Liz Memel, whose many students include a few movie stars. “It’s thinking that the dark side is dangerous when in fact the dark side has lots to teach us.”

In these classes, adult students experience what it feels like to be hand-fed, to be criticized while playing on the floor, to be ignored or over-parented.

At the weekly baby group meetings, parents sit to the side as babies and toddlers crawl around in a large, open room carefully strewn with RIE-approved toys as a certified instructor shares tidbits of wisdom on a wide range of age-appropriate, child-development issues from sleeping habits to mood swings. Babies explore their finely calibrated environments without being swamped with direction or criticism. Babies aren’t placed on their stomachs to build strength, a practice known as “tummy time,” because RIE’s late co-founder Magda Gerber famously taught parents not to put babies in positions they can’t independently get into or escape from. “Empathy,” said Emel, “is a big outcome for adults and children.”



Tobey Maguire and his family. Credit: Newscom

The more devoted parents are encouraged to take RIE training, where adult students experience what it feels like to be hand-fed, to be criticized while playing on the floor, to be ignored or over-parented.

“One of the most common misconceptions is that we just let the babies cry and we don’t pick them up,” says longtime instructor Hari Grebler, who teaches in Santa Monica and makes RIE-approved toys and baby furniture. “What RIE talks about is, how do we pick them up? Do we just snatch them up from the floor? Or do we go over and talk and try to find out what’s up and tell them, ‘Now I’m going to pick you up.’”

Parents devoted to the method say it’s a relief from the more mainstream notion that children need constant stimulation. For Amy Gennrich, who attended RIE training, the group’s unofficial credo—“do less, observe more”—

allowed her to trust her instincts. “It seems to be a little bit forgiving of the parents,” she says.

Emma Gray, a Santa Monica, Calif.-based fine art consultant and mother of two, appreciated the way the teaching brought thoughtfulness and confidence to her parenting. “At the first couple of RIE classes, I started picking it apart,” said Gray. “But after a while it had a very profound effect ... There’s this idea that the children have got to dance, have got to swim. What they need is nature. Basic stimulation from other children. Being outside. Natural stuff.”

RIE was co-founded in 1978 by Gerber and Tom Forrest, then a pediatric neurologist at the University of California, Los Angeles. But Gerber is the face and spirit of the organization. A Sorbonne-educated aristocrat from 1930s Budapest, Gerber, who resembled Anais Nin, was married to a successful textile factory owner with whom she had three children. Her life took a turn after she started volunteering in a Hungarian orphanage, working closely with renowned pediatrician Emmi Pikler.

Even during Hungary’s post-war tumult, after Gerber’s capitalist husband was thrown in jail on suspicion of being an American spy, she took the child-rearing techniques she learned from Pikler and modified them for her own infant son, Bence, in what became the foundation for RIE. “No matter how dire the circumstances were,” Bence Gerber recalled recently, “there was always a little tiny space that was reserved to be my space... We may not have had enough food but I always had that space.”

After the family fled to Los Angeles in the late 1950s, Gerber established RIE in her modest two-story home where the group remained until her death in April 2007. At a RIE conference the following year, devotees spoke of Gerber with reverence, recalling their encounters with her, quoting her as one might quote a holy person. Dozens of her former students—all of them middle-aged women who first met Gerber when they were young mothers themselves—sobbed at the podium as they detailed her profound influence on their lives. After her death, they said, they saw her in the trees, in the hummingbird’s flight, in the clouds. “Sitting at her feet, you knew you were in the presence of a wise spirit,” said Kirsten Lange, a former Gerber student who is now a child-development instructor at Cal State, Fresno.

The group, which lost its headquarters when Gerber’s family sold the Silver Lake house, is now based in a Lutheran church on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, and has, since her death, grappled with ways to preserve her legacy while expanding the reach of her teachings.

Last year, the group started offering teacher training in Manhattan and announced the first “RIE accredited” preschool in decades—located in Charleston, South Carolina. The organization also has outposts in New York, Sacramento, Santa Cruz, Boulder, Tulsa, Tampa and Melbourne, Fla., as well as in Alberta and Ontario, Canada. And in addition to parenting classes and educator certification, RIE publishes parenting books, teaching manuals, and DVDs.

Beyond books and manuals, though, advocates consider the method a way of life. People talk about “doing RIE,” said Memel, “But it’s just an attitude, an awareness, a mindfulness.” There are some, however, who see RIE as a parenting cult that makes extreme and ridiculously inconvenient demands of modern parents.

Within the organization itself, there’s also a broad divide. Everyone has his or her own interpretation of Gerber’s teachings. “I’ve found Magda’s disciples, if you will, far more rigid than I’ve ever found her,” said Renatta Cooper, an early acolyte of Gerber, who is now education coordinator at Los Angeles County’s Office of Child Care.

“We all took different parts of her,” said RIE Board President Ruth Anne Hammond, author of the 2009 book *Respecting Babies: Magda Gerber’s RIE Approach*. “We’re not clones. If you ask each one of us, we’ll each have a

different essence of who she was.”

In fact, Gerber herself encouraged that brand of questioning, says Grebler. She considered RIE a guide for parents, but didn't expect blind devotion to it.

“I really felt that she really would like you to come up with your own answers,” she said. “It was never about feeling bad. It wasn't about perfection.”

Gina Piccalo is a senior writer at The Daily Beast. She spent a decade at the Los Angeles Times covering Hollywood and is also a former contributing writer for Los Angeles Magazine. Her work has appeared in Elle, More and Emmy. She can be found at ginapiccalo.com.

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