

A mother's journey with Gentle Beginnings

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Every parent wants to give their child the very best start in life and make sure they have everything they need to develop to their full potential. But in today's hurried world, it seems that there is extraordinary pressure to take even the youngest babies to class after class and to buy them the latest developmental toys and equipment in an attempt to teach them how to play, walk and talk. This is exactly what we did when Benjamin was very young. But instead of being a happy, contented young baby, Benjamin was over-stimulated and worn out. And we were too.

A chance conversation with a friend introduced us to Gentle Beginnings. The friend suggested that Benjamin perhaps needed time to slow down, take in his new world at his own pace and to just 'be'. This immediately struck a chord with us. So my son and I found the Gentle Beginnings parent and baby support groups. These weekly sessions became the perfect antidote to our previously hurried existence. The atmosphere in the group was welcoming and calm, and instead of noisy baby toys, the room was filled with simple, open-ended and tactile 'play objects', such as pine cones, sea shells and polished turned wood. Benjamin was enthralled, but peaceful.

Gentle Beginnings is inspired by the work of Dr Emmi Pikler, a hungarian Paediatrician who believed passionately in the respectful, unhurried care of children and a child-led approach to gross motor development and play. The group is run by Dorothy Marlen, a leading expert in the Pikler approach. Dorothy is warm and caring, and the babies are at great ease in her company; they are heard, understood and respected. During the session, parents are encouraged to allow their child uninterrupted time for free play and to quietly observe their child. They are encouraged to trust that their baby has an innate ability to reach gross motor development milestones, such as sitting and walking, without being put into these positions or with the aid of equipment. Through these accomplishments they gain self-confidence and the desire to learn more, by themselves, for themselves. They come to standing and walking only when their minds and bodies are ready to do so.

The impact of Gentle Beginnings on our family has been profound. We no longer feel the need to constantly entertain Benjamin and, in return, he experiences the pleasure of open-ended, uninterrupted play. He explores his new world at his own pace and in line with his own interests, spending hours examining the way light streams through the holes in a colander or the way a wooden egg wobbles and rolls in an uneven fashion along the floor. We have watched him delightfully contort his body in an attempt to learn how to roll, sit and stand and have marvelled at his perseverance and the self-confidence he has gained from doing so. These are such valuable life skills. We have benefited from Dorothy's wise insight into involving Benjamin in his own personal care. By slowing down and working with him, explaining each step as we go along, he is now an active participant in activities such as bathing and getting dressed, and they are a source of quality one-on-one time. Perhaps most importantly, we have gained the confidence to trust in Benjamin's instincts and wisdom and, in turn, to trust in our own.

Benjamin is now almost a year old and is a far cry from the ill-at-ease newborn he once was. We have no doubt that Gentle Beginnings has played an important part in him

becoming the independent, self confident and contented person he is today. His wisdom continues to astound us.