“Spend your whole life learning and helping!”: An interview with Alice Sterling Honig
(Working title – Alice, if you have another suggestion, we’d like to hear it.)

By Michelle Jachim Barrett
With Jean Mendoza
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Michelle: How did you first become interested in the field of early development and education?

ASH: Well, it wasn’t in my first PhD program at Columbia University – because in that program I was studying rats every day of the week, running rats -- and I was working with psychotic patients at Psychiatric Institute in an experimental PhD program. So it wasn’t until 2 decades later in my second PhD work here at Syracuse University that I studied developmental psychology. Really what got me profoundly interested in children was at that point having had my children and learning what an awesome, enormously complex and subtle job it is to raise 3 different small human beings from scratch, from Day One, and learn so much if you open yourself up to learning from your little ones.

MJB: What are your children’s names?

ASH: Laurence, and Madalenne, and Jonathan. [check spellings of names]. Top one is a neurologist, middle one works with children who were born very prematurely, and follows them throughout the next years, and the youngest is a lawyer, and a marvelous papa of 4 children. They’re all good parents but I just said that because he’s got 4 - that’s harder!

MJB: What was involved in your training and preparation?

ASH: Well, I was very lucky in the early 1960s to work with Dr. Bettye Caldwell who was the chair of the Child and Family Studies department for many years. She had a grant with the head of the pediatric department who was the first person who started Head Start with President Lyndon Johnson. Dr. Caldwell was studying what happens to the IQ, the intellectual ability, of poor children over the first 2 years of life. As I tested infants for her over 24 months, even though some of them had 2 parents, what I saw was this total downward, downward drift in IQ level just from living in a culture of poverty. You know, “culture of poverty” often doesn’t mean just that you lack money. It means there’s a poverty of rich intellectual environment for raising a child. So these little ones were probably not talked to a lot, probably not read to, and yet they were well-loved. But we saw this huge drop in IQ, over 20 points. At that point, Dr. Caldwell decided with Dr. Julius Richmond, who was the head of the pediatric department at Upstate Medical Center, to found what she called The Children’s Center under the auspices of Syracuse University under a grant. She wanted to provide high quality infant-toddler care for groups of infants, but at that time in New York State it was forbidden by a law to care for infants in groups. … She had to get a waiver from the state. So here was Dr. Julius
Richmond who founded Head Start in the 60s with President Lyndon Johnson, and he, with Dr. Caldwell, did a pioneer thing: they began a quality infant toddler program in a little old house just a few blocks from here. We learned so much in the first half-year (4:28) or ¾ of a year – that none of the intellectual development of the middle class infants in that program was in the slightest going down – you know, people were afraid that if their children went to school with poor kids that maybe they would decrease in their intellectual development. Then [Dr. Caldwell] concentrated on accepting the children of poor and low income, low education families.

In that program, we did everything. We created curriculum based on Piagetian, Eriksonian, Mahlerian theory. We sat and tried to translate theory into “What does this mean we should be doing with babies?” We’d put our own kids to sleep, get a babysitter, and come (5:57) back at night and work on creating curriculum. Nowadays with zillions of books and lots videos that must seem unimaginable, but that’s how it was in the early 60s.

I feel so privileged to have worked with her. I still write to her all the time in Little Rock, Arkansas because Dr. Caldwell was my mentor. Through this early job, to learn how beautiful and amazing the world of early childhood was – especially very early childhood – so that you spend your whole life learning. You never have learned enough about little children, and I started with Dr. Caldwell. [Note to editor: The question “What was involved in your training and preparation?” and Alice’s response would make nice video clip for the journal.)

MJB: Of all the roles you’ve had in the field, which have been especially rewarding?

ASH: Well, I love being a teacher. My mother was a teacher. My mother was born in a small shtetl, that’s a little village in Poland/Russia along the borders. And the Cossacks came and killed Jews … and killed one of her uncles. When she came to this beautiful America, she only spoke Yiddish. She grew up to be a marvelous teacher of English Literature to junior high school students because of what she called the Goldene Medina[?] -- this “golden land” that allows you to live and work hard and become whoever you can become by studying hard and working hard.

What I am most grateful for is the heritage she gave me for language. She was a teacher who had to mark 300 papers every weekend. I don’t know if teachers still do that. My dad would take us on a long walk to Prospect Park in Brooklyn so that she could mark papers in the afternoon. She had the opera on every Saturday afternoon – I loved classical music from when I was little. I heard Caruso on records she had bought. And she would recite poetry by the yard, so that I can recite to my classes reams of poetry from Shakespeare or whatever. Often in today’s [university] classes when you ask, “Who knows where that [line?] comes from?”, maybe one or two students will raise their hands. But sometimes poets said things about early childhood and parenting and human beings that no child development specialist has written in prose quite so beautifully, in terms of expressing what certain feelings or situations are.
So I would say my mother gave me a deathless love of writing. I have written all my life; so that I have over 500 articles and dozens of books. She also gave me a love of learning, of wanting to learn more and more so that no matter how old I grow, I always feel that there is something I can learn by watching a child’s interaction with a parent or a caregiver. It’s not like … learning to lay a good brick and you’ve learnt it well and you’ve done it beautifully, but then how many different things could there be? Maybe you can because I’m not a bricklayer. So maybe you can. But about children there’s always something new to learn.

And then I worked with Dr. Caldwell … training her caregivers. After the Children’s Center was taken over – the project director was Dr. Lally – the program was expanded so that we then had home visitation. I trained the home visiting staff and I could work with the teachers every week. Just learning how to teach adults and learning how to observe the teachers and their interactions in the classroom continuously for formative and evaluative measurements so that we’d know … how we could improve things to make life flourish for the little ones –[that was very rewarding].

Being with parents as I assessed their children, I learned so much about the quality of parenting; of vast differences in family upbringing. That was very important to me. [I once] gave a compliment to a mom and said, “Your toddler has so much language!” -- meaning that I was so delighted … to hear this little one’s language in the classroom. And the mother said back to me, “Yeah, she do talk too much. She very fresh.” She’s very fresh. And I thought, “Okay, I meant it as a compliment. I have to learn to speak more precisely about what I’m saying so somebody understands that this was something beautiful about their child. That’s something I need to learn.”

So how did I learn? From books, from parents and children, from my mentors, from being constantly in contact with doing research with parents, asking them questions about how they raised their children and then publishing articles particularly for the Implicit Learning Theory materials that I use. Just sitting in parks with parents and saying, “If your kid did this how would you respond, how would you handle that?” and then learning … from their replies. So doing research was another precious way to learn about young children.

…. Living abroad in different cultures helped me…. When I was in China when Mao Tse Tung was dictator there, I was scared on my first visit because there were soldiers everywhere and people all dressed in just light colored [tops and] pants that were dark. [Note: the audio is slightly garbled in the previous sentence so transcription may not be accurate.]When I went to the infant centers I saw such loving, tender holding of little ones, and I saw that they had pajamas with patterns on them. That means that no matter how much more it cost, in a very poor country, infants were precious.

I’d see a woman walking along the street holding a baby and the baby had diarrhea coming out over her hands, and she was hurrying -- not to scold the baby but to look for a water pump somewhere along the street so she could wash off the baby and herself!
And I learned that in some cultures, even with a dictator that might have killed 6 million …people in his culture, people still loved tiny babies more than in some families that I was doing home visitations with in my own culture. So I learned to respect that aspect of cultures that really felt the preciousness and the tenderness that young children need. So I guess every experience helped me, not just raising my own kids.

JPM: Would you like to say a bit more about Implicit Parental Learning Theory, to clarify what it is, how it developed, and its current applications in your work or others' work?

ASH: The IPLET (Implicit Parental Learning Theory) is a questionnaire for parents. There is a separate IPLET for parents of infants, toddlers and preschool age children, and an IPLET questionnaire for parents of 5-6 year olds. Each IPLET statement names a common childhood behavior and the interviewer asks a parent how she or he would handle each behavioral situation, such as a child aggressing against a playmate, or nagging at the parent to read a book, or having trouble settling to sleep, or acting scared.

We have carried out and published research with IPLET in 5 different countries using interviews with low education urban parents: India, Sweden, France, India, Korea and the USA. (I did the French and the Syracuse interviews). It is fascinating to see both the similarities and differences in maternal responses. In each culture, moms were far more likely to use a greater variety of responsive techniques (when a behavior was baffling to them or not approved), [Alice -- than the fathers were, or --?] Some of the techniques they reported are: reasoning, comforting, punishing physically, and scolding.

Degrees of use of physical punishment or of ignoring developmentally expectable behaviors differed by culture. For example, Swedish moms were far more likely just to ignore behaviors that they deemed normative for a developmental stage.

I have also published (with Jung) the different responses of Korean fathers and grandfathers to discover whether there are intergenerational differences in fathering patterns. Contemporary fathers answered with more flexible responses.

The most recent IPLET research I have been carrying out, with a graduate student who did IPLET interviews in Shanghai, asks fathers and mothers separately how they would respond to child behaviors they may see as change worthy,. We want to find out whether parent gender roles differ or are more similar [to each other?] in middle class modern Chinese families in handling child behaviors that are quite common across cultures.

MJB: You have investigated and written on many different topics in the field: infant toddler care, social and emotional well-being of children; language development, and quality care are just a few. Of all the topics and ideas, which have you found to be the most compelling and what has made them so?

ASH: … I loved working with Dr. Frank Oski, who was the head of the pediatric department at Upstate Medical Center. We did quite a few studies together on effects of iron deficiency anemia in infants and toddlers. It was a very strict study -- random
assignment of infants either to get iron supplements when they had low hemoglobin or to get an intramuscular saline solution. And until I did that work, I never realized that a child is very solemn, a mom might think “Oh, she doesn’t love me”... One mom said that to me on radio call-in show one time: “He cries all the time; he doesn’t love me.” But it could have been that he had below 10.5 hemoglobin level and was cranky and irritable because he didn’t have iron-fortified formula! I learned so much from that research. [In the iron deficiency study] I wasn’t allowed to know who was in what group for years until we had collected enough data. But I found the children so crabby and solemn -- and I usually am willing to stand on my head and make funny faces for a baby -- and a week later some of those babies were wreathed in smiles. Dr. Oski would not tell me who was in which of those two groups, Michelle, but I could tell!

And their IQs jumped! IQs don’t [normally] jump in one week. I learned so much from that research that was precious. That a simple little thing like having iron fortified formula, which all babies are given usually in today’s world [could make a difference], but this was 30 years ago, or not even 30.

I was doing research, living in Israel in Jerusalem for awhile. I went to visit clinics with both Arab and Hebrew speaking pediatricians to work with the mothers. I felt privileged to be allowed to see how the well-baby clinics were set up so beautifully, with a corner on the floor for any mom to play with toys, and with a person to help them learn to be better at working with toys and their babies, whether in Arabic or in Hebrew. [The doctors] said “Oh, you’re Dr. Alice Honig. We’ve read your article with Dr. Oski. Ever since then we’ve been very clear to any mom who’s going from breast-feeding to bottle-feeding that you must use iron-fortified formula. And by doing the Bailey test in Arabic or in Hebrew we have found in one year at least a 5-point increase in IQ compared with our readings from our testings from years ago. We’re so glad to meet you!”

That was great joy to me, to hear that [the] research meant something in the real world, not just to publish in a journal and get some extra points getting from assistant to associate professor or something….

Also I did work with Holly Brophy, one of my doctoral students who came to be the Riley Special Lecturer [at Syracuse] this year. We were trying to do home visits and teach teen age high school drop out single moms about attachment theory and how to help their babies be cuddled and talked to and how to read their signals of distress and meet them promptly “so that your baby can be lovingly and well-attached, securely attached to you. So you’ll have a baby who’s more cooperative when they’re 2 or 3 or 4, because these are the things we know from research.”

And we found that after half a year of home visitation, the home visitation was not as powerful a variable as whether the mom had thought, “My mom hit me around, my mom yelled at me. My mom didn’t say kind things to me. I don’t want my baby to grow up feeling that way -- mad or bitter. I want better things for my baby.”

I called that insight reflectivity. Holly and I wrote an article together: “Reflectivity: key ingredient in positive adolescent parenting ” [L.P.: Brophy-Herb, Holly E. & Honig,
Alice Sterling (1999), Reflectivity: Key Ingredient in Positive Adolescent Parenting. Journal of Primary Prevention 19, 3, pp. 241-250.] and it was picked up in Canada by a group who got a grant, and they taught reflectivity to teen pregnant moms.

And that’s another thing that made me so happy. Again, it was research, which was published so that makes you feel good. But that somebody actually then used it to be helpful in the real world! You know, we [in the U.S.] have the highest rate of teen pregnancies in the Western industrialized world, and we don’t do anywhere near enough. We might do enough at clinics for high risk pregnancy but we don’t do near enough -- except for programs like Dr. David Olds [at the Prevention Research Center for Family and Child Health]-- to help parents learn quality parenting skills – and learn to be reflective: “How do I want my baby to be?”

I’ve had teen moms say to me, “He loves this!” And she shows me a huge jar of that frosting you buy in a can for a cake! She’s giving it to a 4-month old. Now who does love it? The teen mom! So she’s decided that her baby loves it at 4 months. Then if he cries all night she’s going to think he’s a naughty baby. But you know what, she doesn’t know that this is not so appropriate, the high sugar level, for a little baby.

Because of my outreach work with parents I’ve been so lucky; I’ve learned a lot about [some parents’ beliefs] that we don’t do anything [to remedy] in coursework in most high schools….

**MJB: Whose work has influenced you, and what about their work has engaged you?**

ASH: Well, first, Jean Piaget. Because he taught us to watch a baby’s every move so that you learn that, “This wasn’t there the moment they came out with their little limbs together and their little eyes closed at first.” That anything they learn, like to play pat-a-cake at the midline, to cross the midline to get a toy that’s over here, is a fantastic thing. To begin those throaty cooing vowels is amazing when they put them together with a far-forward consonant and say ma or da or pa, then double it – what do you get!?? -- you get of course “Ma-ma, Da-da, Pa-pa.” (Even in Hungarian, it’s Appa and that’s a language that doesn’t have many cognates in other languages.) But Piaget taught me to observe infants and toddlers. He must have been a pest to have as a husband. He would go where his wife was nursing a baby and say, “Coo-coo, baby!” and the 3-month-old would leave the nipple out of the mouth and look for his eyes. But he taught me, “My god, she already knows to use her ocular motor muscles to look where Papa is calling from a distance.” So I learned from his writing like *The Origins of Intelligence* to be a more careful observer because of “Papa” Piaget.

And I learned from Erik Erikson’s work, about all the stages of the great nuclear conflicts for emotional development: to develop by Year One trust versus mistrust in your self, in your caregivers. I learned about all the great nuclear conflicts of the first years of life all the way to the end of life: accepting what life we lived or feeling, “If I’d only married somebody else who had a different boss, things would have turned out differently!” ....
And then I learned from Margaret Mahler. I was very fortunate to be doing research in Paris at the time on iron deficiency anemia and she was speaking at a conference in the south of France and we drove down so I could see her in person.

…It’s a great joy for me to realize that I have been in the same room with Paiget and heard him speak …. I’ve been at the lunch table with him…. My loved one was dean of Yeshiva University’s Belford [?] Graduate school. He called me one day at Syracuse and said, “You’re coming to New York City tomorrow.” I said, “I have things to do.” And he said, “No, Jean Piaget is being given an honorary doctorate by our university, and I will sit you at the lunch table with him.” I said, “I’m coming!” ….

I got to be in the presence of the great theorists: Piaget, Mahler, Erikson – not Freud, who died in England – but these mean a lot to me, these people. (The finest book that explains in detail the concepts of Margaret Mahler about early development is Oneness and Separateness by Dr. Louise Kaplan. My favorite book by Erik Erikson -- I have reread this book dozens of times and still love it more than any other of his works – is Childhood and Society.)

And people who are young like yourself can read their books…. [but] one of my students said to me in Infancy-Toddler Workshop a few weeks ago, “I thought … they must have lived way over hundreds of years ago, Dr. Honig.” It shows you what happens: [the younger people] think of them as Old Folks and to me they are still vividly alive because their ideas meant so much to me, and their clinical examples.

That’s an important point for me to make. I’ve studied from books but without the clinical experience with people – babies, children, teachers, parents, different cultures – it has to come together. I always say our field is like a 3-legged stool: theory, research & practical experience. And you know if you’re milking a cow and you cut off one of the legs of the stool, you’ll fall off on your tush. You really need all those three legs of learning, understanding young children and the families from all these areas. So I feel very grateful that I was able to learn in all those three areas.

I am a licensed NY State clinician psychologist, also, so I see children and parents in agonies – often in divorce custody, big fights. I’ve learned to be very humble that there’s not always a solution for some of the problems of some children who are really in trouble, unless you can make a parent feel, “If you really love this child, could you try to see what’s happening from his or her point of view?” You learn from clinical work with human beings, to be more humble and patient and to help people to see …from the child’s point of view.

I learned a lot from doing my volunteer work…. I worked for over 10 years as a volunteer with the Onondaga County Mental Health Association. I worked with groups of parents in very difficult and contentious divorce custody cases where there’s sometimes so much of what Freud would call projection of evil onto the other: “If it weren’t for her! If it weren’t for him!” (You’d never know that they once married each other and loved each other!) Even [their] infants were getting up lots more at night and crying more, and
certainly [their] young children were feeling so sad. In my own caseloads, their grades
would go down. Sometimes it was easy to fix up a problem: Mom or Dad wouldn’t let the
dog come to the other parent’s house during the weekend visit. Nu, that was easy to fix
up! Sometimes it was much harder, because some people don’t want to learn to think of
their children first. That’s why I love that program -- it’s called Children First – that the
Onondaga Mental Health Association does.

…. I was also influenced and touched by training caregivers for Dr. Lally in the
Family Development Research Program. Some of the people we had as outreach home
visitors touched my heart in a way that nothing else ever did. Some had lived in a South
that was filled with discrimination against African Americans. They had had maybe 4th
grade or a little more education sometimes. But they’d grown up with dignity. They cared
about the parents that we were serving. They went through snowstorms by bus to make
home visits to teen parents who would sometimes giggle behind a door and pretend they
weren’t there. I learned to respect their courage; their willingness to learn Piaget and
Erikson brought down to a level of what kinds of activities [to use], and how we treat
people and how we talk to them, how we help them feel as partners in this effort to help
their children flourish.

So from working with Dr. Lally’s Family Development Research Program, I learned an
enormous respect for those who have suffered discrimination in our own country before
our civil liberties laws – because this was in the early 60s that I started working with The
Children’s Center and then the Family Development Research Program.

MJB: In your years of experience, have you had any shifts in your own perspective on
young children and their care and education? What accounted for those shifts?

ASH: Well, I once walked into Barnes and Noble many years ago and saw that most of
the books [about parenting] were for middle class parents and had words that were
“college-educated” kinds of words. So I started writing some of my books, like my
Playtime Learning Games book, [working] with a Flesch reading expert who taught me
not to say, “categorization” … but to say, “Put things into groups – like, all these cars and
buses belong together and tea set things belong together.” I learned to use simpler words.
That book is written at 5th grade level.

That became a way in which I could feel, “Yes, we can have materials for people whose
… level of English speaking may not be middle class college educated.” I started to have
a whole different view. I didn’t want to just write for journals where you talk in very
fancy terms that I was taught to use in PhD work, but to write for people who would then
say, “I could do all those little activities with my kids, Dr. Honig, because they’re easy
and I could read all those words!” That was [something I heard from] a lady who had just
come from Taiwan, who was taking some of our courses at SU as undergraduate and had
a 5-year-old. She felt thrilled with that book … because she really could do all those
wonderful activities.
I talk about dancing up and down the developmental ladder. So, if an activity is too hard [for a child] how do you “dance down” a little bit? If it’s too easy, how do you “dance it up”? Learning to write for ordinary folks in a simpler way -- so that when I wrote with Dr. Lally the Infant Caregiving book, this is probably at 9th or 10th grade level. When I wrote Behavior Guidance for Infants and Toddlers a few years ago, every chapter’s only two pages or about 3 so you didn’t have to read a lot. Someone could Xerox out a couple pages and do some training with their staff. It’s not 50-page chapters. Each one has little examples and pictures to go with it. And my Secure Relationships book, which I did for NAEYC as gift – all of the materials [published by?] NAEYC like my first parent involvement book -- are gifts to the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Learning to write a simple little explanation, not tomes about what secure or insecure attachment looked like, but maybe two columns; I learned to write more briefly, more concisely – that was big help for me.

And you asked about changes in my thinking…

From Eriksonian theory, I always thought if you cared enough and worked with people, then you could help them raise a spark inside, and teach them little ways… I’ve learned to use metaphor a lot. I said to one client of mine: “You’ve been on a gray road because of child abuse that happened to you, sexual abuse in your childhood. Let’s start on the yellow brick road. We won’t reach Oz for a long time maybe, but we can see the towers of it, and you’re on a yellow brick road and not this gray road…”

I’ve also learned that no matter how hard you work, some folks think when they bring a child to you: “Fix up my kid”! As if something’s wrong with their child instead of something needs healing in the [parent-child] relationship. So that if [the parent has] been giving orders or punishing the child and they’re acting out in school, butting up against teacher rules, that this may have something to do not with the child but with the relationship.

Sometimes in my own work, I’ve succeeded. Like teaching about temperament once: A little kid was driving his 10-year-old sister crazy. “Ever since he was born you’ve made my life a wreck!” said this 10 year old to her mom! But when I taught the family to talk about things you’re scared of, things you’re worried about, things you need explained to you before they happen – wow. It changed them all because the little one, the 7-year-old learned to say, “Mom, if we’re going to move away from Syracuse, you’d better show me that new school and introduce me to the new teacher. That doctor you go to, she said that I need lots of time to get used to new things, so you’d better do that!” I was so thrilled. And yet there are other parents who don’t want to change. I’ve learned not to be Pollyanna as much. You can’t heal everybody all of the time….You should just always try your best.

I’ve also learned that although universities have very strict rules – “You should be kicked out if you haven’t finished your PhD in 5 years or 7 years” -- there are some ladies I’ve worked with and gentlemen, who have families to support and life troubles that come along. We should be much more kind about sticking through email –thank goodness for
email! -- with students who are in different states now and trying to draw them back, because maybe they collected all their data and we should help them, even if it’s 10 years later, to finish their degrees. I’m saying that, hoping somebody at this university listens to that one, because it’s very rigid and unfair. Women’s lives particularly, and some men students I’ve had, who were all but finished, finished their qualifyings, but they had wives to support who had heart conditions and they never finished their doctorates. Why don’t we behave more kindly toward people? ….

I’ve also learned that when you do research with your students, you don’t have to have huge grants all the time…. So that in this day when money is so tight, if students are feeling discouraged and they need help, sometimes you just have to have the good will of families or of child care centers that will let you in to do observations. You have to have a good program of research that will teach you all kinds of new things without needing a great deal of money….

I love mentoring, with or without any pay whatsoever: to help a student get through their research. And then look at the printouts and help them see that there’s something exciting there. When they come and say, “I didn’t find anything, Dr. Honig” what I’ve learned is to say, “You’re working as a social worker and you found there are no differences in the way these children ended up who were born with difficulties and handicaps and you’ve been working with each of these families for 5 years and there’s no difference between the outcome measures for your poorest families and your middle class families? – your boss should give you raise for these data! That is wonderful on your part!”

When you can mentor a student who looks up at you and says, “Really, Dr. Honig?” and realizes that “having found no differences” means that their own work in the field while trying to get a masters degree has been wonderful work with families!

There’s nothing like mentoring! It gives you such joy and it makes you feel that you’ve earned your bread on God’s earth.

**MJB: What do you see as the most significant changes in the field since you first entered?**

ASH: More rigidity. I’ve talked about a lot of things nowadays that are forbidden to do. For example…ever since all of our child abuse things that happened in our country – some of which were true and some of which were made up by a psychotic woman in San Francisco, you know, projecting evil onto caregivers – but some of which has happened… I’ve seen that a lot of people in kindergarten are afraid to touch a child because of what’s happened with abuse. We need to rethink the parameters. Thank god you can still touch babies! You have to change diapers and snuggle them for a bottle. I’m talking about children, even in kindergarten who may never receive love and affectionate touch.

**Research shows that if you have children die by age 2-3 years, and you do autopsies and you compare them with children born in the same social class to mothers who have the same education -- children who have not been touched will have brains 20-30% smaller**
than children who have been caressed a great deal. So touch is an extremely important aspect of caring for very young children. [Alice: We would like to be able to cite the actual study and I keep running into dead ends trying to track it down. Also, as it’s written up in the 1997 issue of Time magazine to which you referred, the touch factor seems to be combined with opportunities to play, and we should probably find a way to clarify that in order to help make your point.]

Before the Lord God if … you need to hug a child and you need to rock a child who’s had a terrible thing happen…. You hug them and rock them and pat them, because they need touch. Like one of my clients: the mother went swimming early in the morning, and they called the day care center and said tell the 4-year-old that her mother had just drowned. That child is going to be in terrible trauma – for weeks and months to come with depression. And you don’t “not touch” that 4 or 5 year old.

I’ve seen … a lot more rigid rules in child care centers. I was at a beautiful center a few years ago in the [Southern U.S.]. And I said, “How about a sandbox. I didn’t see one outside. Maybe I missed it.” “Oh, Dr. Honig, the fire department said even though we have a 6-foot link fence, maybe a cat could climb over and poop in the sandbox and then you could have diseases from cat poop.” [Alice: might it have been the health department instead of the fire department?]

For goodness sake, I thought, can we buy something that’s lightweight, or create new engineering materials so that even if you have a large sandbox, you could cover it with the materials that … you could pull it off and have the sandbox for the kids?….

[Children] are not allowed to help with cooking at all at this center. Why not? Look what you can teach with cooking! … If you use an electric fry pan and you peel an apple and see whether you can get the peel to get longer, longest (first of all you’re teaching all kinds of English; “This one is long longer, longest”). “And now we’re going to cut it into slices. How many of us are sitting here? Oh, 5 of us. 5 slices. Okay, let’s see how many slices we can make. Now what do we need to put in so it won’t burn?” And then you can eat the delicious sautéed apples, sautéed in butter…. Not to allow any cooking in Head Start Centers? Excuse me!

What I’ve learned is we have too many rigid rules. Yes, we want to be somewhere in the middle, neither communism nor fascism, but there’s a lot of dancing around in the middle to have democratic principles and to have principles of good child development and care that still keep kids safe. Of course you won’t leave a child alone on a diapering table. That principle should stay firm. But no sandbox? Or no cooking? Come on. It just worries me….

Another thing I see is that [as a society] we don’t value caregivers.

For example, this week a man said to me, “The woman who’s taking care of my 9-month old… she let my baby cry for 2 hours. What am I supposed do?” I said, “My name is Dr. Honig and I know a lot about this stuff and you don’t leave your 9-month-old with someone who let it cry for 2 hours.”
I told him about Child Care Solutions, which is a place you go for resource and referral. Peggy Lievesey is the head of that …. They will not tell you which is a better center or a better family child care; they’re not allowed to by their grants and by state law…. But you can, as a mother or a father, go and observe. So he said, “But what should I look for?” So yesterday I went and gathered some materials and Monday I’ll bring them in to that gentleman so that he can take some time off work – even unpaid -- it’s that important [to find good care].

But [as a society] we don’t value caregivers. If you hire someone and they let a baby cry for 2 hours –what does that mean we think about it? [This father] said, “I need to get a better babysitter”. What does that mean about the values of the culture, that someone who knows about child development and care for young children is [considered] a “babysitter?” [A “babysitter” is someone like a] teenager who’s making money, who cares about her boyfriend and the latest rock record and may read your kid a story but really doesn’t know child development very well. Maybe she took one course, or he took one course.

Or maybe he’s gifted. There are people I’ve seen who are totally gifted [for child development]. Just like there are artists and musicians. In our child care center in the basement of the church, if we had 4 babies to one caregiver, and one of us was diapering and the other one was feeding a baby in arms and another baby started to cry, the old lady who washed our floors, who spoke mostly broken English, from Italy, would put her sponge mop in the pail, wipe her hands and come in and rock that crying one. Bless her heart. She knew. She was gifted for child development. But we don’t think of that as a gift.

…. I have seen horrible things, with parents treating [a caregiver] as a servant instead of as “this wonderful person who is caring for my little one … reading to them; doing turn-taking talk, nurturing them, massaging them, helping them to feel like a wonderful beautiful growing little person. How lucky I am that I can go off to sell bonds and stocks while this person is doing that.”

How many people in the American Congress … know that we wouldn’t have to pay billions for our prisons if we did more about early childhood education and had high quality training, and paid for support for early training the way we pay for people to go to medical school? I don’t mean hundreds of thousands of dollars that we have for college loans, I mean paying for quality care in training for early childhood personnel. What I’d like to see as a change is a complete groundswell of respect for quality child care, and lots more money being put into that. We bailed out the auto companies – I’m not saying we shouldn’t have – how many billion dollars? And yet we don’t spend billions, do we, or even millions on high quality training for teachers of young children? Only 8% of infant-toddler care in the US is high quality care! That’s scary and it makes me worried because we are the most powerful, richest nation on earth despite our depression/recession/whatever you want to call it.
I think [we need to be] changing the mindset [about what we put into early childhood]:
“Hey, we’ll save lots of money on jails! Hey, we’ll save lots of money on litigation, if we
do raising of children with secure attachment, with wonderful prosocial skills, with very
rich language, with a love of books.”

In our Children’s Center, if you had come in … [with a smile], a 12-month old or a 13
month old would have come toddling [to you] with a book, maybe upside down, but you
looked like a nice stranger who might have a lap and could read to them. I loved that
about our teachers. They knew how to imbue little tiny children with a love of books so
early and we don’t have that happening in most centers. I did research with one of our
doctoral students on how much babies were read to in infant care centers, in middle class
centers, in Onondaga County. I bet you can’t guess how long a reading episode lasted --
A minute and a half! And practically no one was reading to children under 13 months.
And toddlers were not being read to a longer amount of time compared with younger
ones. That shows that we have a lot of work to do in training caregivers.

And we need to find a different value system that values caregivers and parents. How
many parents who stay at home feel valued for the quality of work they do or the lost
income they have?

MJB: What do you think are some of the more promising developments?
I just loved when Berry Brazelton got grants to train pediatricians in child development in
Boston. But I don’t know whether that exists anymore. One promising development
should be that people are lured into taking child development classes if they intend to be
lawyers, or pediatricians or nurses. Or if they intend to be a principal of a school where
there will be kindergarten children who are being integrated into mainstream classes.…

We want all children to have the best possible education, but some of your 5 year olds
that come to school might still be at toddler level or at a 3 year old level in terms of
intellectual functioning. And some of the children may not have had secure attachments
so they may need a lot more socialization skills in kindergarten…. I’ve had a principal in
one Midwest state that said, “We’re bringing you in as a consultant because as principal
of a school I haven’t got a clue about what’s going on in child development with the
kindergarten. So we thought we’d bring you in.” I thought that was very honorable and
honest.

The cuts that are made when we have a recession come where, first? They come in
services for young children, in health care for the neediest, in outreach parenting
programs. You heard the governor of California said that his heart breaks when people
tell him they can’t bear what’s going to happen.

Raise taxes for God’s sake! We in the middle class should be not saying we want to have
a more expensive car, but that we’re willing to pay more taxes if they will go into
programs for more quality care for young children.
Why is everybody so afraid of taxes?.... Instead of buying a car that cost a hundred thousand dollars, stick with your old one for 2 more years! .... Frankly I’d rather part of that money went into paying for quality programs. And I see that the first thing people say they are going to cut is programs for those that are the neediest in our society which are young children and families....

I’ve even had a middle class mom say when I was reading a story, “How did you do that?” I said, “Pardon me?” She said “You added in a lot of words like ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you’ and ‘Wasn’t that wonderful that he did that for me, said Little Turtle’. That’s not in the book!” And I said, “No, but you’re in charge of a book when you read to a young child until they start to read -- and then you read it the way it is written. You’re in charge of a book so you add in all those loving and kind words.” But we don’t teach parents to do those things unless we have money for outreach programs.

You asked what I see as a positive change right now and unfortunately, what I see is that where we’re going to cut, unfortunately, is where we should not be cutting funds. So I’m sorry but that is something that I wish was not happening.

MJB: What are you going to be working on next?
Well, I’m trying to troll in those [graduate] students who have been out for 10 years who do have their data collected and I know how beautiful their data are I would like for them to finish their masters or doctoral degrees.
I’m also looking forward very much to my new book called Little kids, big worries: stress-busting tips for teachers which will come out this fall with Brookes Publishers. So I’m really looking forward to that book coming out because not only is the recession causing more stress in terms of economics for families, but we have very high rates of divorce in our culture which we didn’t have 50 years ago, and we have high rates of people who are dual career parents who are trying so hard to be all things -- high quality worker, high quality parent, high quality citizen. And sometimes something gives, and sometimes that something is, “I’ve got to put my kids to bed early! I’ve got to get up at 5 o’clock to go to work!” But the kids really need more time with the parents so they’re acting out. Just to give you a little vignette.

What I’d like to do is work as a mentor for more students. This past year I worked with Chinese students on going out to the community of Chinese immigrants whose children are learning English –and finding out more about what happens when immigrant parents’ kids start to want to speak English more and their parents want to keep both cultures going. I’ve become very interested and have submitted two articles on that and one has been accepted.

China is an enormously important nation in this world. All of my Asian students have been people who are so precious to me, because in the culture I grew up in, one respected elders, one loved learning, and children were very precious. Confucian cultures have those same 3 beliefs as my Jewish culture that I grew up in. So I feel extremely close to my students from Asian cultures and if I can do more to help them do their research based on working within their culture groups, I would like to do more of that also.
I hope I can continue to teach my Quality Infant Toddler Caregiving workshop. Next spring would be the 34th year and I really love doing that.

[Alice: Are there a few sentences you would like to say in closing? I know your interview with Michele continued for some time after you had answered ECRP’s questions, and the current “last words” for this portion of the interview seem a bit of an abrupt end.]

To be added to Selected Bibliography:

How did you become interested in your field of scholarship? As a graduate student, I began with an interest in adults’ mental imagery, but the birth and development of my own daughters sparked an interest in how young minds develop so quickly. My first scholarly work was about the structure of young children’s knowledge of everyday events. Eventually, my research interests began to be influenced by my teaching of a course titled “Infancy Across Cultures,” which focused on Navajo society. My students in that course wished for opportunities to join me in learning firsthand about child development... In particular how an early childhood educator implements, different approaches to honour culture and diversity, and to advocate for social justice in an early childhood settings. As such, it allows an insight into the important role that families and their background plays in the everyday lives of the children and educators within early childhood settings. Abstract Multicultural education should be made to become an important component in the early childhood education. We live in a country which is culturally diverse. The cultural, racial and ethnic composition of preschools in the United States is becoming very diverse. Because of this diversity multicultural education needs to be implemented within early childhood education.