

# The Intelligence of Infants-Transforming Teaching

by RaKay Gross



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“I have spent my whole life caring for babies in different settings. When I became a lead teacher in an infant classroom I thought I knew everything I needed to know about caring for babies. I was called a “baby whisperer” my whole life. I knew how important tummy time, reading, talking, and following the baby’s lead in play time was.

I was happy in my classroom, we had the sweetest babies, the best group of parents, and the cutest hand and foot print crafts that we made to look like butterflies, bats, and reindeer. Then I was offered the opportunity to join the Collaborative Educators Institute (CEI) at Paradise Valley Community College. The facilitators were able to give us a ton of supplies to use in our classrooms for free, we just had to use the supplies, document what we were noticing, and share our work with the other people in the group. I was nervous because the main focus of our group was using charcoal. I barely offered my infant’s crayons and markers because they put everything in their mouths. I happened to have a small classroom at the time and was able to put a lot of time and focus into sharing the materials with the children in my class. I started by offering it in a high chair and one on one. I quickly noticed that the babies were so intrigued by the material. They would stare intently at their hands, make a mark on the paper and look to me almost as if asking “do you see this too?”, and rub their fingers along the marks, smudging it all over the paper. When I began to realize how interested they were in the material and that they were engaging with it more than just putting it in their mouth I got much more free in the way I offered it. I put huge sheets of paper on the ground, I put the babies in the middle of a paper, I even taped paper to the walls. This really encouraged the babies to use their whole bodies in the movements they would make with the charcoal.



Street Chalk and Chalk Pastels  
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As I began sharing my work with families, with co-workers, and in my CEI group people were so interested that the babies had learned to use the materials and notice the markings that were being made. They even noticed that the black charcoal was better on the white paper, and the white on the black.



Charcoal and Chalk Pastels  
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I had such an amazing experience and completely changed the way I do artwork with infants during this time, so when I was offered to join the group again I immediately signed up. This time the biggest thing we were offered was a light table. I had a new group of children and was really excited to see what they thought about the light table. We used the light table primarily on the ground, with the light off, and with an array of loose materials. Nature, translucent blocks bags of paint, and kitchen containers.



Light Table  
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They quickly noticed that the materials changed with the lights. They would stare at them so intently and look back to me, almost for a confirmation. When I would change the colors they would look at each material, I think they were noticing that the changing colors changed the color of the material. They eventually noticed that the knobs on the light table were what would change the color and they started turning the knobs on their own. They would turn the knobs and look at the table and look at me.



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My time working with infants with the light table and the charcoal really helped me notice that infants are so capable of learning and being trusted with high quality materials. They make similar connections to older children, they remember what different materials do, and they enjoy to be free in their interactions with materials.

After learning by participating in CEI and taking early childhood classes at Paradise Valley Community College I have looked at my job as an infant teacher in a new light. Of course basic care is important and being sensitive to different needs is important, but I have begun to trust my infants as colearners in our world who deserve to be treated as such. I am much more quick now to let them paint freely on paper on the floor, dig toys out of jello, choose the color for the light table, and use the same materials as older children at my school, just modified a little bit sometimes to be appropriate.

I think we can all learn a lot from the way infants interact with the world and the materials we have to offer them if we take a step back, follow their lead, and give them the freedom to explore and learn.