



# Babies in non-formal education:

## thought-provoking testimony of a peer trainer

by Kateryna Shalayeva

It is after midnight as I start to draft this article for Coyote. This might come as no surprise, as late-night sessions of preparatory teams are well known to you. So they were to me. What is unusual is the fact that my late-night session has its start, and not its end, after midnight.

Alexander is in bed, sleeping peacefully in his cot. Alleluia... His mum can share her story of being a mother-trainer who brings her child on board for non-formal education.



The parent-trainer issue has already been raised in *Coyote* back in 2003.<sup>1</sup> That article about being a trainer and a parent made me think how far we have come in understanding of the subject in ten years. I have even thought of three major periods of “evolution” of parent-trainer identity and of the attitude to the presence of children in the non-formal learning space.

### Period 1

At the beginning of the continuum, we find parent-trainers who were desperately looking for child care in “irregular” hours and on weekends, and were terribly missing their little treasures while they were away at a training course. The above-mentioned article belongs to that period.

### Period 2

They, the parent-trainers and the participants too, have later decided to bring their kids along with them. This marked the second period of evolution. It turned into a “family” trip, as trainers who were travelling with their children were also accompanied by their partners, parents, other relatives or family baby-sitters. The role of “accompanists” was to provide baby-sitting services during the training hours and preferably to keep kids outside of the training setting.

### Period 3

The revolution is near. Babies, infants, young children and their older peers, together with young adults and other generations find themselves all together in a common learning space. Trainers bring their children to a course and keep them integrated in the learning community. This is the momentum of the third period of evolution. And here I stand.

Disclaimer – I did not plan this article for the European Year of Active Ageing and Inter-generational Dialogue, nor was my child born for this reason. :-) But this European year is particularly dear to me, as I am living my dialogue between the generations every day in my European family.

And I am living daily in this mixture of roles of a mother, a wife and a professional woman. And even with all the existing affirmative actions and support structures, this mixture of roles remains very uneasy for a modern woman.

One of my present challenges is how to integrate us (a parent and a child) into the non-formal learning process. I therefore wanted to return to this subject and to list certain pros and cons of having children share the learning space with adults in non-formal education. I would also invite fathers to have their say!

I shall be more specifically focused on the challenges of being a mother-trainer who is accompanied by her child, both of whom are members of the preparatory team of a non-formal learning activity. I will raise the following issues: what makes learning special when a baby is involved? How does the baby influence interaction among team members and with participants? How does becoming a parent influence a trainer’s competences? I should immediately mention that I do not necessarily have answers to all these questions.

## Why would I recommend inviting baby into the preparatory team?

The most adorable competence of my fellow baby-trainer is his intercultural competence, where his smile is his strongest skill. His ability to approach everyone with a smile and without any hesitation always positively surprises me. Once he arrives at a course, he makes friends very fast. On a training course he joins working groups and participates in plenaries. His natural ability to communicate and network is simply amazing. Persistence, wit and courage compose his mediation and negotiation skills. He usually gets what he wants. It is hard to say no to him. His reaction to people and events is immediate and clear. His research and evaluation skills are in constant development.

Alexander has legendary leadership potential. People who have never met him have heard about him. People who have met him once keep talking about him. Teaming up with his mum 24/7 (24 hours a day, seven days a week) makes him an excellent team player. I shall further add learning skills, where his strongest point is doing, by simply copying what others do and by experimenting. It is a child’s natural non-formal way of learning, which

is by playing and by reproducing all productive inputs. Finally, a child’s creativity of learning, by singing, dancing and performing, with music or without it, drawing, posing, making faces and jokes, makes a trainer’s profile complete. Wouldn’t you like to have a person like this among your team members or participants? I definitely would!

What does it bring into group dynamics? It fosters communication, gives an extra nice subject to talk about. It also stimulates creativity, as baby needs to be occupied all the time. People team up to teach and entertain a child. And it makes adults play not in a simulation exercise, but in natural conditions. As it is well known, playing is the best method of learning. What does it bring into the team of trainers? It stimulates co-operation, support, profound interpersonal exchange and humour. What shall I say about my own intercultural, team work, communication, networking, mediation, negotiation, research and evaluation trainer’s competences? As a mother I am trained daily by my adorable peer trainer. It makes my learning non-formal, experiential and lifelong!





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### Why would I leave baby home?

#### Travel

In this section I would name the size of the suitcase, mobility barriers and misconception. From now on our suitcase includes items that I was previously not even aware of (food, toys, clothes, diapers, soaps, creams, tissues and other hygiene products, exclusively provided for a baby). Our hand luggage is a miniature version of our suitcase. It contains all the items necessary in an emergency situation (late arrival, missed transfer, lost luggage). Baby also comes with a personal vehicle, the carriage. I have already forgot what it was to travel "light", with a minimum of things, as most trainers used to travel.

I shall add to this security checkpoints, which I need to go through with all my hand luggage (computer, of course, water), carriage and baby in my arms. I have to give a good reason to border police for why I am not "kidnapping" my own child. Getting on and off a plane or a train is a true experience! Plus delays, transfers, lost luggage, in addition to staircases, curbs, narrow doors and dark corridors upon arrival, all these give a completely new colour to life when baby is involved in travelling with me.

#### Time

A child has a rhythm of life which does not necessarily correspond to the well-structured programme of a training course. Indeed, children need to eat, sleep, be changed and receive attention. As a mother I take time to change and feed my baby, and put him to bed. As a trainer, I skip important elements of the programme here and there. It is "not good", say some fellow trainers/participants. Non-formal education requires "full participation".

This concept of "full involvement" in relation to parent-trainers and parent-participants seems outdated. Traditional training schedules do not allow for a very basic human need of parents. Our need is to be available, when required, in order to satisfy the very basic human needs of our kids.

For instance, when there are two of us (a parent and a child), we need twice as much time to get ready in the morning. And our lunch break or tea pause is only a half break or a half pause. The two of us have individual needs and we split our free time in two. Time pressure, therefore, is very high.

Could this sort of time pressure cause tensions within the team of trainers? Indeed. The presence of a baby leaves much less time for debriefings and might be distracting. There is also a constant need for support during the course. It is impossible to anticipate when a baby might suddenly have those "little needs". Are the fellow trainers always willing/ready/capable to provide back up? Tell me, what do you think?

Opportunities to mingle with participants decrease significantly; not from arrogance but simply from the pressure of multiple responsibilities.

Above all, my professional reputation suffers when it comes to deadlines. I submitted this article to *Coyote* with four days of delay. I have never been as bad with deadlines as since I became a mother.

#### Security

There are places where I will not take my child. Those places might be in conflict zones or simply do not have special arrangements to guarantee security to children. Places like this are not appropriate for children.



#### Comfort

Children learn by playing, but they also scream, run and make other noises. Screaming, when everyone is concentrated, is very impolite. It is annoying to participants and to members of the team. But, after all, it is a baby screaming. We all screamed when we were babies.

Babies like to climb up the stairs, but they also climb on trainers and participants. I saw different reactions to this. Someone would be happy to take a baby next to her/him. Someone else would feel disturbed. Solution: talk about it!

What are the baby's favourite toys? Items that adults use, of course. In a training course this means pens, markers, papers, but also mobile phones, laptops and other intriguing stuff. A baby would love to play with all that, preventing its functional use.

Putting flip-chart paper on the floor is not a good idea either. Everything paper-like is very attractive to babies. Especially, when there are bright colours and funny drawings, shapes and letters on it.

Last, but not least, there is the breastfeeding issue. Without going to extremes, I breastfeed in public. Still, not everyone likes or accepts that. There are certainly cultural, but also individual, differences and preferences. My choice is functional: I either leave and skip a session or I stay and breastfeed, where I am. I invite people who feel uncomfortable to come and talk to me about this very sensitive issue, a long-standing taboo.

### In conclusion

**First** of all, I believe that children do not simply "follow" their parents to a training course, but once they are there they become full members of a peer learning community. It is not only that children learn from adults. Adults can learn so much from (their) children too. Discovery is mutual.

**Second**, we learn at all ages. The presence of a baby in a learning setting shows how we learn to learn! And we shall be grateful for this gift.

**Third**, a "hidden agenda" persists. Instead of blaming children and their parents for discomfort that children might cause, we had better think of how to re-organise and modernise our learning space and techniques in order to allow full participation and comfort for all generations.

**Forth**, non-formal education equals inclusive learning. No one can be in two places at the same time. Scheduling, therefore, is in question. The challenge is to tailor (or be willing to tailor) training schedules with consideration for a special parental need in terms of time.

**Fifth**, the relations of a parent-trainer with fellow team members and participants are two sided. "Ice was broken" between the baby and the participants, but it is not necessarily the same for a parent-trainer and the rest of the group. A fully booked schedule prevents informal mingling. This is just one more issue to take into consideration.

All in all, it is up to everyone to decide whether or not to take up a challenge and bring a baby on board for non-formal education. My choice, I have made it.

Morning and sunrise. Time to go to bed. I might be lucky to get a couple of hours of sleep.

If you have had similar experiences and wish to share, please, do not hesitate to contact me: [kateryna\\_shalayeva@yahoo.com](mailto:kateryna_shalayeva@yahoo.com). This subject needs a good lobbying force.

P.S. I would wish to thank all my fellow members of learning communities for contributing a great deal to my thinking on this issue.

<sup>1</sup> Carina Stabauer, Annette Mutter, Ragga Stefansdottir (2003), "Being a Trainer and a Parent", *Coyote* No. 7, pp. 28-30.



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