I didn’t notice her getting off the plane. She first caught my eye sitting calmly in one of those plastic airport chairs — waiting. Suddenly her face brightened as a man pushing a stroller came into view. The man reached down and hugged her — they studied faces and held on. Then he stepped to the side and knelt down, talking to his daughter. The woman leaned closer to the child and talked quietly and intently. It was several moments before she reached over to touch the child’s face.

As the man and his mother talked (yes, I have assigned them life roles), the grandmother would frequently turn back to smile at the child, touching her gently, addressing a comment to her.

And so it went for many minutes, while others greeted and rushed away, this trio just enjoyed each other and took their leisure getting reacquainted. While other grandmothers demanded instant hugs, this one waited.

It was their relaxed enjoyment that caught my attention, that and the incredible acrobatics of this young father as he tried to figure out how to push a child in a stroller and a mother in a wheelchair — and carry diaper bags, tote bags, purse, and coats — all at the same time.

I was left to think about the way I rush about greetings and departures with my own family. There is always this intense, irrational push to get everyone back home — to be settled. As if only at home can we begin to enjoy each other’s company.

And parents, rushing to pick up their children after a long day at work, seem to feel this same pressure — a great need to get home where they can relax and be together. But certainly, some of that relaxing and being together could better take place in the center. How much better for both child and parent if they can come gradually back together, enjoying their reunion. Such calm moments give parents a chance to separate from the issues of their work life and children the opportunity to share their special place and the interests of their day.

How can we help parents sense the importance of spending time this way?

We can invite them not only into the center and the classroom but into the story or the activity. We can engage them in whatever is happening as they arrive.

We can elicit their comments about a topic of the day, or direct their attention to the progress of a project.

We can give them a place to be with their child, either within the group or apart.

We can demonstrate a calm, leisurely approach to these departures by being calm ourselves. When we are rushing to tidy up or polish off a few more details or when we haven’t time to share a story or ask a question, we give the message that rushing is the order of the day. We may, in fact, contribute to a parent’s sense of relief at getting away!

Focusing on the moment at hand rather than worrying about past or future moments or other responsibilities and possibilities is a challenge. Taking time to enjoy each other, wherever we find ourselves together, is a gift we can give both to ourselves and to others.

Bonnie Neugebauer — March, 1996