



Nurturing trust

In the first of two articles, **Dorothy Marlen** explores the Pikler approach to the care of infants and young children...

You may not have heard her name, but the genius of Dr Emmi Pikler (1902-1984) and ongoing exemplary childcare at the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary is finally beginning to gain attention in the UK. The Pikler approach has for many years influenced early childhood care in countries in Europe and beyond, and was taken to the USA and developed as Resources for Infant Educarers (RIE) by a woman called Magda Gerber, but it has been slow to reach these shores. Dr Pikler's contribution to our understanding of young children and how to care for them now needs to be placed beside other important early years educationalists. What was discovered, and is still practised, at the Pikler Institute can offer a new benchmark of care that is fully in line with the recent discoveries of neuroscience and attachment theory.

Aims and principles

Pikler's aim was to assure physical and psychic health in infants and young children.

She recognised (in the 1930s) that the key to achieving this was through creating secure attachment. She saw that giving respectful care, particularly during times of bodily care, was one of the main tools for achieving this. She also saw the importance of allowing the child's self-initiated activity and its deep influence on the child - her self-image, self-control and many other things. These understandings and others were developed by Dr Pikler first in her work as a family paediatrician in Budapest, then in the orphanage there that ran for over 65 years, and now in the daycare groups that are still run from the same premises on Lóczy Street. Among the many factors that contributed to her success in improving children's lives in families and in residential care (which is well documented - download SIGNAL, Vol 18 no. 3-4 at ow.ly/By9D4, and see *Bringing up and providing care for infants and toddlers in an institution* at ow.ly/BybOh), was the quality of care given and the understanding of the importance of self-initiated movement and play.

PIKLER IN THE UK

THERE ARE NEW WAYS TO FIND OUT MORE...

There is now a Pikler UK Association (pikler.co.uk) and a website where you can access articles and links in English (thepiklercollection.weebly.com).

The first UK Pikler training, led by a Dutch Pikler pedagogue, is almost complete, and new training is due to start in January 2015 - visit pikler.co.uk

A Level 3 qualification is in the process of being accredited. This will integrate Steiner and Pikler principles and meet the EYE criteria - visit www.emerson.org.uk/holistic-baby-and-child-care



Respectful care

I thought I knew what respectful care meant until I observed carers at the Pikler Institute. It was a profound experience to see the level of trust, enjoyment and gentle cooperation that is possible between carer and child. The care approach is highly skilled, complex and multi-layered; as well as the care practice, it includes ongoing consideration of key worker roles, observation and team discussion, none of which I have time to describe here. Instead, I will give a few pointers to what this approach to childcare entails with the single example of nappy changing.

"World peace starts on the changing table"

I heard this simple but profound phrase while training at the Pikler Institute, and it informed me that what we do in the routine repetitive tasks of infancy, undertaken several times a day over several years, ripples into adult life. These repeated care moments will be, without exception, unconsciously taken in on a bodily and emotional core level by the child. Whether the care is rough and rushed, or calm and gentle will have consequences for how the 'other' as well as 'self' is experienced, perhaps for life. Nappy changing is the most delicate of care times. It involves touch in the most intimate parts of the body and requires total vulnerability on the part of the child.

With the child, not to the child

At the Pikler Institute this time of bodily care is treated with the utmost respect and is seen as one of the primary times when trust and

relationship can be developed. It is not acceptable to commit any form of 'micro-violence' to the child during this (or indeed any) time with a child. The use of adult force is not acceptable. What this means is that all the aspects of the care activity are carried out *with* the child's cooperation, not *to* the child. The child is invited to take part in every step and nothing is carried out without the child's consent; this is true for even the youngest baby.

Calm, gentle, with no distractions

The nappy-changing is carried out slowly and calmly with the carer fully present to, and engaged with, the child. This is a special time with *this* particular child. Full attention, as we know from attachment theory, is crucial to creating trust. In the Pikler daycare, each child has special times each day alone with their key worker during nappy-changing, at mealtimes and preparing for and after nap-time, depending on their age. In the residential nursery these one-to-one times happened during feeding, bathing, sleeping and dressing activities, several times a day, and were central to maintaining good attachments and a calm environment with contented and active children.

The child's interests

The carer's attention is not just concerned with the task but is open to the child's interests in the care-giving activity and other things in the vicinity too. The carer is attentive to all cues from the child and the activity becomes a dance. The care-giver is always the leader of this dance, guiding, allowing the conversation, adapting to the child, yet always coming back to the nappy-changing task.

At the Pikler Institute, children are not given something to play with whilst carrying out nappy-changing. The child is invited to be fully engaged rather than risk a dissociation from what is happening to her body. This time is an invitation for an intimate and cooperative shared endeavour.

Learning language

Even an infant can understand what her carer is requesting, and can respond and initiate. As the child gets older, conversation includes the past, present and future interests, and

over time this creates a deep sense in the child of being held 'in mind' by their particular carer throughout the day, creating a natural doorway to language learning and practice.

Adapting to the child's movements

A perhaps startling aspect of the care routine is that the carer adapts to the movements of the child, allowing the child to roll onto her tummy, or later stand in the nappy-changing activity if this is what the child wants. Special changing tables make this 'freedom of movement' absolutely possible. So rather than the carer trying to keep the child on their backs (which risks the use of force), the infant or toddler's need to move can be adjusted to by the adult. It makes for a much happier and engaged child. With practice this works! (See *Being with Infants and Toddlers at owl.y/ByoOh*.)

Consequences

If nappy-changing is carried out to this level of mastery then there are several important consequences for the child and the day-to-day relationship between the child and the carer. The child is filled up emotionally by this special time with the carer and slowly internalises the full, calm and gentle attention given. Rather than rushing through the care moments, the child has rich moments of one-to-one relationship, and this is a key to achieving secure attachment and the emergence of self-initiated exploration and play.

The high art of care as practised at the Pikler Institute works. It takes training, time and practice like any art. It necessitates an ongoing process of observation, self-reflection and team support. Those of us who have undertaken this training have experienced many uncomfortable realisations of our own unconscious cultural habits as carers (and parents) of children. But isn't this an essential journey anyway for those who wish to work with our youngest children?

Next issue, Dorothy will look at the importance of not interfering with a young child's motor development and play.



about the author

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