

Eat Paint?

I went to the Emmi Pikler Institute in Budapest in 2004 and 2006, and it was the most amazing wake up call. I was shaken awake from the unconscious state I was in regarding infants and toddlers, and since then I have been growing in my awareness of these little people and how we treat them. Paint happens to be important to me, as you might expect, since I have always been an advocate for children's creativity, and I myself am an artist. But paint has got me pondering of late...



What is it that has us turn off our common sense when it comes to infants and toddlers and paint? In all Early Childhood services throughout New Zealand - perhaps with the exceptions of Montessori and Steiner - you will find infants and toddlers eating paint. Paint all over large parts of their anatomy, including all around their mouths where they have been ingesting it. Why is this? Why do we allow children to eat paint? What part of the brain turns off so that we can stand by and watch infants and young children eat paint?

My good friend Kimberley has the best approach to turning the brain back on when she is talking with people during professional development. She asks the persons assembled: "Tell me," and she pauses for their attention, "Would you eat paint?" And the answer is always a unanimous "No. Of course Not." Not one adult would eat the paint, and it might be instructive to ask them, "Why not?"

The next and obvious question is, "Well, if it isn't OK for you, why would it be OK for babies?" Paint has the cheapest pigment in it to colour it - it's not food colouring. We know that even food colouring doesn't do the system a lot of good. The medium the pigment is presented in isn't food either. Eating paint or sucking the paintbrush is not like eating soil or chewing on a pine cone. Paint is not a naturally occurring substance, it has been engineered by chemists. While eating paint doesn't kill infants, we are here to protect them from eating that which is not designed for the human digestive system. And if you wouldn't put paint into your own digestive system because instinctively you know it isn't right, then the same knowing same applies to the baby. Surely.

I have pondered on this and I believe that what we are dealing with here is the very subliminal "cultural download" we received growing up within this culture that "babies are less than

human, they are not fully human yet". You can see it in our actions and hear it in our language, "Look out for the baby, it is eating the paint." Did you spot it? The baby is not an "it", "it" is the pronoun for things, not human beings. We would never refer to an adult as "it" yet we refer to babies as "it" all the time. That is unconscious, and likewise, I am sure that allowing infants to eat paint is an unconscious act. And it gets worse, in our state of unconsciousness we have even thought it was cute, taken photos of infants doing it, and then published the photos. All this when we wouldn't eat it ourselves and we know that it isn't a good idea.

How would I like it?

What can shake us awake so that we start considering infants in a respectful light? A reliable way is to ask the question, "How would I like it?" That one question gets us out of our heads where we can have all sorts of rational reasons justifying our approach: "They love bright colours. They love messy play. They love getting it everywhere. How cute, they are like little Jackson Pollocks." How would I like it? It is the one question that gets us back into our heart where where we feel. We will feel that this is not right, because we wouldn't want it.

Our professional development can come to infants' and toddlers' aid too. We can learn enough about the developmental stages of infants and toddlers to know what is appropriate as an activity. To do this we need to observe well, watching developmental progress so that when children are ready for the next level we will know what to provide that is suitable. And when children have stopped mouthing? That is the time to consider getting out the paints, that is the time for young artists to begin their painting career. It is soon enough and it is exactly the right time.

Eat paint? I don't think so.

Pennie Brownlee: 2009

