
We are all free and equal human beings.

Pondering on help, support and interference.

I am interested in the idea that we are all free and equal human beings. I hadn't really thought about it, consciously, until my first visit to the Pikler Institute in Budapest in 2004. There the idea came into sharp focus as I observed the way the people there live and demonstrate this basic belief which they hold for all humans, but especially for babies.

In their upholding of the freedom for the baby, they have seen and learnt more about babies than (perhaps) any other current Western cultural group. This is a big claim, but I do not know of any other Western cultural group that has allowed babies the freedom that is their birthright, and researched the results. We might think we give babies their freedom, but few of us could truly claim to have allowed our babies the freedom to follow their own timing.

There is no child that needs to be helped, not one

Dr Pikler, and those who have continued her work after her death, make this claim: not one baby needs to be helped to reach any of the milestones which are part of the human design. Because the baby is a free and equal human being, it is not the role of the adult to interfere, or to help. It is the adult's role to support the baby's own unique unfolding that comes from the vital impulses arising from deep within the baby's being. These same impulses 'grew' the baby in the womb and they are not going to start being unreliable just because the baby is out of the womb.

Observe with wonder and respect

In the 1930s, as a family paediatrician, Dr. Emmi Pikler observed that nearly all adults had expectations of babies which the babies could not possibly meet. They couldn't meet them because the expectations were beyond the babies' developmental levels. The genius of Emmi Pikler is that she observed, closely, hundreds and **hundreds** of babies, over more than five decades. She approached babies with the perspective of wonder and respect. She and her team learned what babies do when they respond to **the deep stirrings from within their being** without any interference from adults. They learned the **order** in which these impulses arise and are embodied. They worked out ways to support these impulses of development, thereby supporting the autonomy of the child. That kind of sensitivity to the human spirit is respect in practice.



Dr Emmi Pikler, 1902 - 1984

This support begins, not surprisingly, at the beginning. When nurses* hold and carry the infant, the infant is totally supported; head, neck, the length of the spine and legs. There is no need for the baby to feel unsafe, the baby learns that the adult is the safe and reliable partner. The baby is supported by the caregiver until she can support herself, and until she chooses to support herself.

If you put yourself into the baby's shoes and imagined that you were being carried, then of course you would want someone to carry you confidently and safely until you were ready and able to make your own way.

Back to basics

For the first five or six months when the baby is not being held and supported she is placed on the back. Not the tummy, the back. Because the baby is a free human being, the adults do not put the baby into any position that she cannot get into or out of by herself. As Emmi Pikler's daughter Dr. Anna Tardos noted, "What's free about that?" New babies cannot get onto their tummies for many months, and then only after responding to a whole choreography of impulses, movements, and development which guarantee she will get there - in her own good time.

On her back she is free to do as Nature has coded her to do; come into balance in her physical body, literally. In the beginning when the baby is on her back she is completely unstable. She **has** to move her limbs, and the only way that she is free to do this is on her back. It is only by moving her limbs that she gains balance and control. Outside of the water-world of the womb, these movements are the introduction to a long and increasingly complex ballet of balance with gravity. By far and away **most** of our babies are prevented from following this ballet through step by step. They, like us, will pay for this thwarting for the rest of their lives. The most obvious

** At the Pikler Institute the caregivers were called nurses. The residential nursery of the Institute closed in 2011, but fortunately for us, their Education & Training continues, along with their Child Care and Education Centre.*

thwarting, to the eye, is what happens to the physical body. Instead of the spine supporting the child/adult in the way that it is designed to, with gravity holding the person upright, the baby/child has to make compensatory developments to hold herself up when she is put into positions she hasn't prepared for. These postural defects are integrated and carried forward.

Then there are the effects on the psyche of these long term blocks installed into the body, and the effects of not being physically able to respond to her own life force-impulses. What price do we pay for damping down the body's exquisite ability to read and embody the life-force? Added to this, the baby is not recognised for the things that she can do, and is expected to do things that she is not designed to do - yet. This could be the very early imprinting of that all too common feeling of 'not measuring up.'

The ways that we interfere with our babies' development are many, and they are not done because we want to 'muck it up' for our babies, on the contrary, we want the best for our babies. It's just that in New Zealand culture we have inherited and evolved ways of being with our little ones without thinking of the consequences. We just haven't stopped and examined what it is that we are doing.

So what are we doing that steals our babies' freedom to grow as designed?

Putting babies into any position that they can't 'do for themselves' - yet - is no support to them at all. It forces them to use muscles that are not developed and can cause loss of muscle balance that the baby has worked hard to gain. If we are going to be truly respectful of children and their innate intelligence,

- we don't stand them up, jump them on their feet, or walk them
- we don't sit a baby, and we don't prop her with pillows to sit
- we don't prop a baby in a sitting position to dress her
- we don't pull babies into the sitting position by their hands
- we don't put them in highchairs or restrain them in a 'bouncers'
- we don't hold them up by their hands to walk them
- and we don't restrain them in 'exer-walker-bouncer-jumpers-sitters' of any description.

Restraining devices are not for free and equal human beings. They restrain the child from following the developmental impulses (life) coming through them in the correct sequence. Since, as Carla Hannaford notes, "movement is the architect of the brain", there are serious consequences from restraining a baby.

When you think about it in light of the baby developing according to its perfect timetable, omitting everything listed above is just common sense. The things listed above are outright interference, even if that is not the intent.

Why the great hurry? What is that all about?

We don't like being hurried along when we are trying to master something, in fact we know that hurrying only confuses the whole process. The baby will make all the milestones responding to her own internal promptings. Why do we think it would be a good idea to speed things up? We need to stop and look at this question very seriously. The underlying beliefs that have us wanting to speed up normal development need to be examined and discarded. Research at the Pikler Institute found that milestones can take a little longer to reach, and that they may occur in a different order from what we would consider 'normal'. They have found that babies crawl



The joy of perfect balance, first on the back...



... and later on the side.

before they sit, and when they do sit, because they have taken their time and taken the right route, they never fall over. There are none of the ‘thuds’ that you hear when a baby who has been propped goes over backwards and whacks her precious head. Gross motor development is a question of balance, one step at a time. There are many steps a baby must master if they are going to sit safely with perfect balance, and short cuts are a short circuit.

If she's not sitting, then how do I feed her?

The only major change we meet when we stop interfering in our babies development is the position for feeding. There is no problem when a baby is being breast fed or ‘bottle nursed’, the baby is wholly supported in the arms of the mother or caregiver, but when the child is not being nursed, how do you feed her without sitting her? At the Pikler Institute they don't sit her, they support her in ‘lap-feeding’.

Lap feeding

Lap-feeding for babies means supporting the baby at an angle so that she doesn't have to use any of the muscles she hasn't ‘worked out’ yet. That angle is the difference between the seats in economy-class travel and first-class: seats in economy-class will not go back far enough to support you, but if you can afford it, you can pay double just for the luxury of being fully supported.

A baby is lap-fed until she decides that she wants to get down from the lap and eat at the table. There is a warmth and intimacy during lap-feeding that is part of the glue of partnership; it's the same kind of connection that child and adult experience when they snuggle up together for a story. The child is fed and nourished by this intimacy until the push for autonomy over-rides it and the child decides to move away to the table. This is typically is between twelve and fourteen months. This ‘slow-cooked’ independence, has been carefully nurtured and grown, it is not forced. The differences in the personality and mental health for children who are allowed to blossom into independence, rather than being forced, will stand them well throughout the rest of their lives. Interviews with adults who spent their early years at the Pikler Institute attest to this.



Painting: Kalman Aron



The intimacy and support of nursing is the lead-in to lap feeding. In a culture that eliminates close bodily contact with bassinets, cots, prams, pushchairs, bouncers etc., lap feeding and lap nurturing are all the more important to the relationship.



Painting: Mary Cassatt

Free and equal human beings

When you stop and think about it, treating babies as free and equal human beings is common sense. It is, however, not our common practice here in New Zealand, but that can change. It only needs people like you and me to stop, think about it, and then try something different from what we have ‘always done to babies’. When we learn new ways to be with our babies and toddlers, we are enriched. The baby, however, fares far better than that; the baby is given the best start in life that he or she could possibly have.

Pennie Brownlee • Notes for ‘Dance with me in the Heart - Level One • April 2013

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