

## **Possums or Possibilities: Pondering children, culture and cultural imports**

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*There is conversation within the early childhood world that likens the importing of educational and care paradigms into New Zealand to the importation of possums. Some people believe that there is no place for imported paradigms because what we have here is more than sufficient. Are we indeed importing 'possums' which will threaten Life here, or are we entertaining possibilities which will enhance Life?*

### **Boys and Girls, Holdens and Fords**

Before I launch into it allow me to clarify my starting position. A human baby is a 'bundle of biology', and that bundle comes in one of two models - a boy or a girl. (Yes, I acknowledge there is sometimes a mix-up with x and y chromosomes, but this is rare so on with the discussion.) A boy or a girl: both human babies, same but different. Rather like a Holden or a Ford: both cars, same but different. Human babies come with different coloured skin, hair texture, eye colour in the same way that cars have different coloured paintwork and upholstery. These superficial differences do not alter the fact that a car is a car and a baby is a baby.

### **Nature - The Human Pattern**

The 'biological bundle' of the human child has 'biological imperatives', things that must happen for the child to unfold and develop to the optimum of the potential that is coded into 'The Human Pattern'. (Pearce, 2002, 2007; Lipton, 2002; Plotkin, 2008) This pattern of development is the same pattern whether the baby is a Xhosa African baby, a Han Chinese Baby, a Pashtun Afghani baby, a Ngati Maru Maori baby or a fifth generation Scottish Pakeha baby. Some might choke on that thought, they are the people have mixed up biology with culture and ethnicity. (Not race, there is only one race, it is known as the human race.) The biological 'pattern of unfolding' for the human child has been referred to as 'nature', I will refer to it as The Human Pattern. To me, The Human Pattern is sacrosanct.

### **Nurture - human patterns**

Every single child is born into a culture. A culture is a pattern too, a pattern made up of many patterns: beliefs, values, mythology, stories, language - and all of the behaviours, expressions and artefacts that grow out of that conceptual (mind made) seed bed. The beliefs we hold about babies and children, the stories we have absorbed, the language we use, the patterns of interaction we 'downloaded' unconsciously during our own infancy and childhood - all go to generate the ways we behave with babies and children. This is culture, and these 'human patterns' called culture have been referred to as 'nurture'. They have also been referred to as 'environment' - 'The biological bundle is born into a cultural environment'.

### **Nature or Nurture? Biology or Culture?**

The question of whether nature or nurture/environment is the most influential has been up for debate since posed by Victorian Francis Galton in the mid 19th century. Near the end of the 20th century researchers realised that it was the wrong question. The BIG question, the question that has to be asked and answered now is how can the patterns of human cultures serve The Human Pattern?

### **Ethnopediatrics**

In 1994 a new branch of enquiry was born, ethnopediatrics. Ethnopediatrics is the coming together of anthropologists, psychologists, paediatricians and public health personnel, collaboratively researching the ways in which cultural patterns impact on infant and child mental

and physical health. Their findings are instructive: some cultures have evolved ways of nurture that closely match the biological imperatives of the baby, others have evolved cultural 'nurturing' patterns that fall far short of what the baby needs for his or her development. According to their findings, the general cultural patterns of the Western world fall into the latter category. For example (and you might not want to hear this), their findings reveal that only the babies who are brought up within Western cultural child rearing patterns get colic and reflux. (Small, 1998) This has nothing to do with ethnicity, the patterns of behaviour (stimulus) trigger the biological response. Because Western child rearing patterns 'went viral' with the colonial emigration patterns in the 19th and 20th centuries, ethnicity is no protection from their reach.

### **There isn't only one way - whew!**

One of the findings from ethnopediatrics is that different cultures have evolved different ways to meet the same biological imperatives, meaning that within cultures there can be differences, but as long as those different behaviours meet the biological imperatives, all augurs well for the baby. This is the message that the Brainwave Trust is trying to get across to us here in New Zealand: there are enormous individual, societal and fiscal costs when we do not meet the biological imperatives. While the Brainwave Trust convincingly presents research about what happens and doesn't happen in the prenatal and post natal periods of brain development (the biology), enough to scare you, it hasn't scared us into really investigating the roots of our 'cultural imperatives' around the nurture and 'non-nurture' of mothers, babies and young children. The cultural imperatives must match the biological imperatives for the unfolding of what Joseph Chilton Pearce calls 'The Magical Child', the child who is the expression of the potential coded into The Human Pattern. (Pearce, 1977, 1990)

### **Who will stick their neck out for the children?**

The task of responsible practitioners and policy makers is to stop and take stock of what we do know about The Human Pattern, and see how our beliefs, values, ideals, stories, language, policies, and practices support The Human Pattern - or not. I use the word 'responsible' intentionally because it is time to take responsibility for those cultural policies and practices that are detrimental to our children's growth and development. This can be a very bitter pill to swallow when we realise that that which we have been doing, with the very best of intentions (given our knowledge and world view), has been limiting and even damaging of children and their futures.

### **The Human Pattern is...**

There is a model of The Human Pattern that has long resided in this land, and which has been widely shared (if not widely integrated) within Early Childhood by wisdom holder Dr Rangimarie Turuki Rose Pere, through the mnemonic Te Wheke, the octopus. (Pere, 1997) As a mnemonic, Te Wheke would be hard to beat since an octopus has three hearts, allowing for a trinity of the most important aspects to underpin the model: Te Aorangi (the Universe), Aroha (Love), and Whenua (the Land). Therein lies the heart of the story: spun out of the stardust of the Universe (literally, according to Western physicists), through the dimension of Love, the child incarnates onto this Earth as an Earthling. Six of the tentacles of Te Wheke represent six dimensions of the child which need to be taken into consideration and nurtured: tinana (the body), wairua (spirit), mauri (life force), mana (the divine right of the child, God-given), whatumanawa (literally 'the all-seeing eye of the heart', the realm pertaining to the emotions), and hinengaro (the all-powerful mind). The remaining two tentacles are focused reminders of the structures and functions within the culture which act as support for the multidimensional child: whanaungatanga (the 'organism' known as family) and Ha, taonga tukuiho (The very breath, the held, treasured, cultural patterns within which the child and family will exist.) Each of the tentacles represents something far more complex than a name can hint at, and the suckers act as reminders of different aspects of the richness within each dimension.

## **The Human Pattern is...**

While we do not (and probably could not) know everything about the complex multi-dimensional miracle that is The Human Pattern, we know enough now to consider how our cultural patterns of behaviour match The Human Pattern, or negate it. The combined work of researchers and scientists, across disciplines and across cultures, has given us a rich, detailed model of The Human Pattern. Aspects of the pattern that were previously a mystery, or an intuition, have been uncovered. The message for the prenatal period, postnatal period, toddlerhood (and whole childhood actually) is nurture.

*"Oh yes, we do that,"* is the response in unison from parents and teachers.

Yes, we do do it - to the degree that we understand 'nurture', and no, we don't do it to the degree that The Human Pattern requires. The interpretation of the word 'nurture' by the majority of parents, education and health professionals in New Zealand does not come close to 'nurture' as interpreted by this selection of 'champions for children', Dr Michel Odent, Ashley Montague, Dr Frederick Leboyer, Dr Allan Schore, Dr Bruce Perry, Dr Bruce Lipton, Dr James W. Prescott, Jean Liedloff, Sue Gerhardt, Robin Grille, Bill Plotkin, Joseph Chilton Pearce... Neither does it come close to 'nurture' as it is recognised in ethnopediatrics and by the World Health Organisation. The quality of nurture which meets the biological imperatives is actively discouraged and/or prevented by many individuals, professionals and most institutions within our culture, as the following few examples illustrate.

## **Culture shock**

At every point in the child's existence (from even before conception (Lipton, 2002) - but we'll skip that for now) the 'organism' has survival choices to make based on the information the 'molecules of emotion' deliver: the choice is either to contract for defence, or expand for growth and unfolding. (Hannaford, 2002; Gerhardt, 2004; Lipton 2002; Chopra 2005) Either choice has consequences in every one of the dimensions of the child, but it is the incontrovertible neurological, psychological, physical evidence that has brought the degree of urgency to the debate. The reason why nurturing is critical is that the nurturant environment triggers neurotransmitters which free the organism to 'choose' unfolding the highest possibility encoded within The Human Pattern. Nurture which supports The Human Pattern includes non-interventionist, natural childbirth, and breast feeding for at least two years. (Prescott, 2001; Pearce, 2010) According to scientist and researcher James W Prescott, humans are the only primates that refuse to breastfeed their infants and the only primates who commit violence to their own children and against their female population. He and his team posit there is a link. Nurture also means the child is in the constant movement of being carried for at least a year (Prescott, 1996) and in the close comfort of sleeping with the Mother/parents for the first years. (Hunt, 2001) If your internal dialogue is racing "But, but..." you are experiencing culture shock. Prepare yourself, there is more: Babies are not born to be left in isolation. The mother and the baby are a unit, ideally for the minimum of three years (but four is better), and the terms 'bonded parenting' and 'attachment parenting' have been coined to describe the meeting of this biological imperative.

## **What to do with such a mismatch of culture and biology?**

It is more than unlikely that parents, education policy makers and commercial interests will adjust their behaviour in a hurry to make a better match since cultural patterns have their own momentum and march on inexorably. At the same time, research shows that The Human Pattern will not adjust to suit current lifestyle choices either. This could be catch 22, but the very intellect (as distinct from intelligence) that has led to this mismatch could, when combined with intelligence, be the tool to lead us to reality which is better for children's health in all of their dimensions, and therefore for our country as a whole.

## **One cultural artefact: trendy, successful, and an unintentional mismatch**

One small example picked from a legion of possible examples: the baby-toddler needs access

to view the face of the parent, this two-way eye-contact is the biological partnership mechanism through which the child establishes 'safe ground' in his or her biology, and never more-so than when in new environments. (Gerhardt, 2004) The majority of Western parents exchanged carrying their babies-toddlers for prams. The information the child had received and processed from close bodily contact was now lost to the child, but eye-contact with the parent was still available. Initially prams and pushchairs faced the parent so at least the 'environmental safety monitor' of the adult's face, by which the child modulates their emotional state, was still available to the child. Then someone had the idea that babies and children would like to see where they are going and hey presto! Overnight, as a result of not understanding the complexities within The Human Pattern, almost every pram and pushchair was built facing away from the parent. Babies and toddlers are pushed out in the unknown deprived of any chance to exercise their 'inbuilt partnering abilities' with which to regulate and modulate their systems. Research shows the levels of adrenalin and cortisol in babies 'out in the unknown without support' rises to levels that are damaging to brain development. Long term, a lot of time in scenery-facing perambulators puts the both relationship and the development of conversation skills at risk according to the British Literacy Council.

### **Sacred. Definition: worthy of Awe and Respect**

While The Human Pattern is sacrosanct, human patterns have not proved themselves to be worthy of the same elevation as of right. Many are not worthy of awe and respect, or even life support. If our human patterns are anti-life, then it is time to go onto 'e-bay' to see if anyone is offering anything better. This is not a new thing: Robin Grille in his excellent and shocking history presented in "Parenting for a Peaceful World" points out that we have already come a long, long way from what was common culture for our Western Forebears. So what is on offer, and how well would the import support The Human Pattern?

### **Import options**

There are a few options that people 'have clicked on' over the years but it is a more recent discovery that excites me the most. While the options of Waldorf education, Montessori and Reggio Emilia have a lot to offer, none has as much to offer to support critical early years of The Human Pattern as the approach of Dr Emmi Pikler. We have had it drilled into us: the first three years are the most important. That is the positive way of saying when the biological imperatives are not met in those early years the damage is catastrophic. Maybe if we had been courageous enough to tell it from both angles we wouldn't be 'trucking along' telling ourselves we are doing such a great job in the institutions we set up for babies and young children when by their very nature, these institutions are built on the biggest mismatch of all - the separation of the child from the parent and family. Courageous Steve Biddulph, in his book "Raising Babies: Should Under Threes Go to Nursery?" cites Australian, British, American and Swedish research illustrating the cost to the child of this mismatch.

### **There isn't only one way - whew!**

That is why I am so interested in importing Dr Emmi Pikler's 'Approach' - approach is her word. (Dr Pikler didn't want her approach to be interpreted as theory, a philosophy, a dogma or a set of rules. She was more concerned that the approach be executed in the 'right spirit' - her words.) The nature of the institution she set up was the ultimate in separation - the children were either orphans, or abandoned, or rescued by the State from home-lives of abuse instead of nurture. You could be excused for asking, as some here in New Zealand have, where does attachment theory fit into that scene?

### **The Culture of Respect**

That's where, in my opinion, Dr Emmi Pikler was a genius. She was able to do as very few can. She was able to step outside of her subconscious cultural conditioning around care, nurturing, babies, toddlers, child development and come up with a set of different 'human patterns' which

superseded her Hungarian culture. These patterns were designed specifically to support The Human Pattern, and do it within the constraints of a residential nursery where the ratio of Nurses (caregivers) was one to eight, eight being her maximum group size. It is one thing to have the level of awareness to be able to transcend cultural conditioning, and it is another thing entirely to lead others beyond their subconscious cultural conditioning into a new paradigm with success. Dr Pikler was able to build around her a team of people committed to just that, learning and practicing the 'human pattern' Pikler called an 'approach', and which I will refer to as The Culture of Respect.

### **On congruency and becoming consciously competent**

Transcending subconscious conditioning necessitates becoming conscious of the beliefs, values, stories, language and attitudes which underpin the practices, artefacts, behaviours and expressions of the new evolving human pattern. The big story, the story that underpins the whole of Emmi Pikler's approach is "The Relationship is ALL. It is a matter of Life to the baby." Note: it is not a matter of Life to the adult, but it is to the baby, because the biological-neurological foundations (for starters) are laid down with their quality dependent on the quality of the relationship. Every baby entered the Pikler Institute traumatised by separation, and Dr Piker's record for healing these babies of what we would now term Post Traumatic Stress Disorder is still inspirational. It is, however, not enough to have a story, no matter how suitable the story as the foundation for a new order of things. There has to be congruency with every aspect of the seedbed of the new culture: the story has to match the attitudes, the values, the language, the expressions, the behaviours and the artefacts. To achieve this congruency - and pass it on - Dr Pikler developed a 'choreography' (her word) of care where every move, for every care moment was prescribed. The choreography, and the way it was 'danced' accompanied by constant verbal cues, brought the predictability that allows the child's physiology to expand into relationship rather than contract in defence.

### **Tender, sensitive, gentle, respectful partnership**

Pikler recognised that the way the child is handled and treated in moments of bodily-intimacy like feeding, changing, bathing, washing and dressing leaves lasting imprints in 'the body of knowledge' around trust, and is seminal in forming the child's world-view and self-image. For that reason, she considered these the most important in the young child's life. Further, their findings were that children handled in such a respectful manner treated other children with the same tender respect in social interactions. This first partnership lays the blueprint for all other partnerships.

### **We do Pikler • we do respect • we talk to our babies • we do**

In short, we don't. Not to the level that Emmi Pikler practiced these behaviours anyway. Not to the level where every interaction is unhurried (even with a 1 to 8 ratio), pleasurable to the senses and to child and adult alike, with full attention to the task at hand - and most importantly, with complete engagement between the adult and the child. This level of care ushers in state of grace, a relaxed, measurable field (Hannaford, 2002; Pearce, 2010) of unified awareness (heart coherence) for child and caregiver. This level of conscious partnership has each interaction with the baby-toddler-child offered as an invitation, and space-time allowed for the child to willingly respond, thereby completing the other half of the dance of respect.

### **We think we do**

We perceive ourselves to behave in ways that we know are desirable, and it takes a degree of conscious reflection to see the incongruency between our stated position and our actual position. I have generated a simple "Do unto Others" quiz that reveals our actual position.

Two sample questions:

(Note, the question is have you ever, not what you may have changed to.)

1. Have you ever wiped a baby's or child's nose with out telling them?

- Would you like it if someone did that to you?  
2. Have you ever picked up a baby or child from behind without warning them?  
Would you like it if someone did that to you?

To date, every person who has taken this quiz has failed in the Culture of Respect, me included. We have all done/still do things *to* babies and young children, instead of *with* babies and young children. The quiz results have left us perplexed as to why we would do to babies and children that which we would not like done to us. At the same time, our answers have given us new insight into the power of subconscious enculturation.

### **What can this import offer us for improvements to enhance Life?**

Dr Pikler developed an approach which matched The Human Pattern so well that the child in separation trauma is able to join in relationship, and from that 'safe container', modulate bodily processes away from fear and contraction, back to growth and expansion. This Culture of Respect supports The Human Pattern so elegantly that it works in the home between parent and child, in the family, in the separation situation that is childcare, and in the extreme separation situation that is an orphanage. It also works for all relationships, with all ages. Two people have reported to me that the approach enabled them to support their elderly parents while they died, elegantly and without fear.

### **The Relationship is ALL. It is a matter of Life**

Pikler's underpinning story gives us the place to start - in all three scenarios. In childcare the story translates into primary care, or 'key teacher' as some prefer to name it. (Spot the culture's bias against care and toward education in this term.) Primary care is a prerequisite on the journey to matching The Human Pattern. Next is the journey of learning and integrating the respectful approach and choreography. This doesn't happen overnight, having worked with this pattern for eight years, I consider it a lifelong journey which supports Life.

### **So, possum or possibility?**

The thing about possums is they endanger indigenous species, they threaten Life unique to this land. Does the importation of Dr Pikler's approach threaten indigenous patterns unique to this land? Are there meeting points in an approach evolved in the 20th century in Hungary with the ancient wisdom encoded into Te Wheke? This was the conversation I had with Dr Rangimarie Rose Pere in July 2010, and it is why Te Wheke is the first model of The Human Pattern outlined in this conversation. The first notable thing about Te Wheke is the value given to Aroha (love), a phenomena so complex and unlimited that it is beyond definition, because a definition will always be limited. But coded into the word aroha there are clues: aro = presence, ha = the breath (try not breathing to understand the importance of love). Aroha is "the presence and breath of our Divine Parents which is unconditional love"<sup>1</sup>. Love is also central to Pikler's approach, not as theory or words, but as the presence underpinning practice. Where there is heart coherence love is present, and where there is full attention - or presence - the space is created for love to be present.

### **Tentacles ...**

The second notable thing about Te Wheke is the equal importance given to six dimensions of the child, dimensions that have found expression in our curriculum Te Whariki, but haven't multiplied like possums into our practice. Dr Pikler was more than familiar with the different dimensions of the child, because a child in trauma 'checks out' with some of his or her dimensions. There is an instructive scene in one of the training videos from the Pikler Institute where a child has become resident as a result of terrible family tragedy. The narrator, commenting on the Nurse's invitations and overtures to the traumatised child, asks whether the child will choose to come back and live, or go on dying. This contraction and withdrawal is epitomised in the children in other orphanages where the staff are not skilled enough to offer invitation to the dimensions of the child to rejoin the dance. Most of us have seen news footage of the result: rocking, damaged children, here in body

but little else. It seems the spirit and will of the child have checked out.

### **... and suckers**

Will is a dimension important in powering the journey to autonomy, and it is valued, encouraged and supported in the Culture of Respect. Likewise, the emotional well-being of the child is paramount. Dr Pikler observed that only an emotionally satisfied child can engage in focused activity and play. The child who is not emotionally satisfied cannot manage the unknown, and is therefore, greatly hampered in learning. The practice of handling emotions - firstly your own, and then those of the children - is central to creating a rich and peaceful learning environment.

### **A body of knowledge**

In Te Wheke, the tinana (body) is considered sacred, and is recognised as the 'temple' within which the spirit can reside here on earth and have a physical experience. Dr Pikler's approach to the body of the child comes not from a map handed down to her, but from her observations of children's growth and development. Her work led the world and rewrote the texts on motor development in the middle of the 20th century. We are just beginning to understand and implement that knowledge, with extraordinary results for the child, in every dimension. In relation to the body, The Culture of Respect is characterised by pleasurable nutritious eating, pleasurable tender care moments, unassisted motor development, and acknowledgement that the child is an Earthling. Dr Pikler saw to it that children spent as much time outside as possible, including daytime sleeps outdoors.

### **Manaakitanga: mana-a-ki tanga = aroha, generosity, mutual respect... toward people**

This space cannot give more than a hint of the richness in both patterns, the new one from Hungary and the ancient one from Hawaiiki. The Ancient map birthed eons ago is profound. Even the tiny bit that Rose shared with me opened a vista vast in its scope. As Rose offered glimpses of the map I could see the connections with Dr Emmi Pikler's very different map, and so could Rose. Dr Pikler, (unbeknownst to her because she didn't speak Maori), had drawn up a map of manaakitanga, and as a map of manaakitanga, you might have to search for eons to find a better one. This map contains within it, like Te Wheke, reference to both the seen and the unseen. Starting from a place where the child is valued as a free and equal human being, the attitudes and actions of the care-giver embody and extend aroha, generosity and mutual respect - or manaaki. A map is never the territory, but this map is like a survey and ordnance map for the care of our precious children. Our seven years of experience here in Hauraki of applying the approach in parent-child Baby'space and Playspace classes has proved to us that following Dr Pikler's map with the right spirit opens up endless possibilities for the peaceful future we all long for.

Pennie Brownlee July, 2011.

### **Post script: The Culture of Kindness**

Since I wrote this article, we (myself and others) have renamed the 'Culture of Respect' the "**Culture of Kindness**". We did this because it became clear 'respect' meant different things to different people depending on their cultural upbringing. The concept of respect is centred in the head, in ideas more than in emotional intelligence. Kindness is more universal in that it put's people straight into the region of the heart which is the home of human intelligence. There there is little or no misunderstanding about what constitutes kindness. With your emotional intelligence you can 'feel it'.

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Rangimarie Rose Pere in conversation 2010

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