

“A Gentle Beginning”

Parent and baby support groups based on the Pikler approach.

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*“Listen, parents,
Look after your children
They are the hope of the world”*

I would like to share with you work I have been developing over the last two and a half years with parents and babies, up to toddling. I hope it may inspire others in the Steiner movement to also share what they may be developing and growing quietly in this exciting and expanding realm of parenting support.

Since my son (now 22 years old) was one and a half I have been involved in parent and child work, first as a parent in a pioneering initiative in Lancaster and later as a parent and child group leader at York Steiner School. The parent and child groups I ran welcomed parents with babes in arms up to rising three, which is what I had experienced when my son was a baby, and also what I had researched when writing the Parent and Child Group Handbook.

Several important experiences finally catalysed me into starting my parent and baby groups. The first experience was undertaking a two year infant observation for an MA in Psychoanalytic Child Observational Studies. For an hour a week for two years, I had the privilege to watch a little boy grow and develop, from being a babe a few days old to being a boisterous toddler. The observations were sometimes overwhelming in their intensity, and I struggled to understand this little lad’s journey, not only from a psychoanalytic point of view, but from an Anthroposophical perspective. I had experienced life for two years in a typical young family with all the common pressures, and I felt deeply saddened by the lack of support and understanding which would have made this family’s journey easier.



The second experience was taking the level 1 and 2 trainings at the Pikler Institute in Budapest. This extraordinary training provided what was missing in my understanding of the very young child – an in depth study of what loving, respectful care looks like and how the relationship (attachment) with the young child can be fostered during times of bodily care (bathing, feeding, nappy changing) in balance with the child’s need for self-initiated movement and play. Although not an Anthroposophical organisation, it was here at the Institute, that I observed and understood Rudolf Steiner’s

indications that the four lower senses (movement, balance, touch and life) of the very young child need to be nourished by the adult’s higher senses (thought, speech, listening and Ego). And that the balance of loving care and allowing the child autonomy in movement and exploration profoundly aids the young child’s “I” to incarnate deeply and healthily into the physical body.

Later I took the first level training with Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) in Florida. RIE is an organisation started by Magda Gerber who had first been a parent and then a work colleague of

Emmi Pikler. Magda Gerber took the Pikler approach to the USA. The training covered similar ground to the Pikler training in Budapest but not in so much depth and tailored to needs in the USA.



The third experience was visiting the Parent and Infant classes at Sophia's Hearth Family Centre in Keene, New Hampshire, where the Pikler understanding has been beautifully woven into an Anthroposophically based family support setting. Here I observed a different approach to parent and child group with the emphasis on allowing the infant to come up into standing on their own without parental interference, with plenty of time in the group session for observation, reflection and support. The groups were also separated by age, so that the new-borns were in a different group from the crawlers and the crawlers in a different group from the toddlers. There was no craft, or snack time but a time for songs and rhymes near the end of the session. This model provided me with the inspiration I needed to begin.

Now I run three Gentle Beginnings groups at York Steiner School. Each group has a maximum of 8 parents – the reason being twofold – the size of the room which is small, but also that 8 seems to be an optimum size for parents to feel welcomed and 'known'. The sessions are one hour and a half long, some in the morning and some in the afternoon. There is a gentle rhythm involving a drink and biscuit on arrival, a time for sharing and catching up with each family, a time for observation and finally time to sing nursery rhymes and other songs. The room is laid out so that the parents sit close to the floor and the infants start out lying on their backs – on sheep skin rugs or later on the floor. The toys are simple. I introduce simple climbing equipment as the children in the group progress to crawling and standing. Parents and children stay with me for around a year or until their child is walking confidently. I send out regular articles by email on relevant topics.

The most important and simple rule in the sessions is not put the infants into a position they cannot get into themselves. This is often difficult in practice as parents generally are encouraged to sit their children up as soon as their backs are strong enough and even children as young as 2 or 3 months may be very used to being vertical all the time. They can then be resistant to spending time on their backs. The practice of early verticality and sitting knocks sideways the natural progression from rolling to crawling to sitting to standing, with the danger of causing incomplete primitive reflex integration and sensory integration issues later on. Experts in remedying these difficulties like Sally Goddard Blythe are at the forefront of alerting professionals to the links between retained reflexes and later learning difficulties, but culturally the practice of sitting up to early, along with long periods of time spent in buggies, seats and other contraptions is fairly normal.



The Gentle Beginning group sessions I feel, like parent and child group session give a deeply cumulative benefit over time, on many levels. Here are a few of the benefits... the creation of a strong support network amongst the parents; a non-judgemental and open friendly atmosphere; simple and appropriate toys and materials; a very relaxed and calm environment; time to discuss issues and questions like sleep, rhythm, weaning; input on appropriateness of practices and toys; time to observe and enjoy the natural development in their own and other children; seeing that

every child is a unique individual although moving along the same archetypal development progression; learning to trust that their child can come up to standing on their own, with all the benefits that will give; enjoyment of watching all the children with their inborn inquisitiveness and inventiveness; learning nursery rhymes and other songs, with all the benefits for later learning that these bring and gaining confidence of giving the gift of song to their children.

I have learnt a tremendous amount about the amazing journey that babies and their parents undertake in the first year of life through running these groups and I now have a format which works for the parents, children and me. I am very indebted in this work to the legacy that Emmi Pikler and the children at the Loczy Institute in Budapest have given us all.

www.agentlebeginning.co.uk

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