

Pikler with Steiner

A personal understanding of how the 'Pikler approach' enriches an anthroposophical understanding of the needs and care of the very young child.

Dorothy Marlen 2011

Innovative models of Anthroposophically inspired childcare have been emerging for several years to meet the growing need for out of home care for the very young child. LifeWays Americaⁱ, Sophia's Hearth USAⁱⁱ, Helle Heckmann's Nokken in Copenhagenⁱⁱⁱ, Der Hof in Frankfurt^{iv} and Awhina in New Zealand^v, for example, have attracted international followings and in some cases created new trainings specializing in the care of the very young child.

My wish to understand more deeply the needs of the very young children and to bring support to others with similar interests in the Steiner movement in the UK, has taken me abroad over the last six years to take relevant trainings. In 2004 I studied with Cynthia Aldinger of Lifeways America, who has developed an anthroposophical 'home away from home' model of care and training, focusing on creating a family home like environment for mixed aged children. During 2008-09 I took "The Child in the First Three Years" training at Sophia's Hearth in New Hampshire, which weaves together the Anthroposophical understanding of the young child, the practical wisdom from the Pikler Institute and movement development and spatial dynamics as it relates to the young child. These two experiences of were both inspirational.

In 2009 I undertook the Level One training for carers of young children with Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) – this being an organisation that was set up by a colleague of Emmi Pikler who emigrated to the USA and started to work out of the Pikler approach there. Finally, in 2008 and 2010 I travelled to the Pikler Institute in Budapest to study under Anna Taros and her team, on the First level and the Advanced level training courses in the Pikler Approach to child care.

Ute Strub, a pupil at the original Steiner School in Stuttgart who trained and worked with Emmi Pikler for 30 years, now runs an orphanage in Berlin called the Emmi Pikler Haus^{vi}. She told me that Freya Jaffke who visited the Pikler Institute many years ago said - "Rudolf Steiner gives us a true understanding of the needs of the young child, and Emmi Pikler shows us how to do it".

As a result of all these experiences, I feel confident that the Pikler Approach, demonstrates in an exemplary way, how several important indications that Rudolf Steiner gave about the needs of the very young child can be practically fulfilled. And I now feel confident to write about it.

Who was Emmi Pikler and what is the 'Pikler Approach'? Emmi Pikler, a Hungarian paediatrician, working in Budapest from the 1920's, devised an original approach to parenting, then later, after WW2, institutional care for infants and toddlers. Her insights, received through her careful observation of children in her medical practice, which supported parents in Budapest, and then in the raising of her own child, informed the radical approach to child care that was then developed at residential nursery in Budapest "Her vision of a healthy infant was an active, competent and peaceful

infant, who lives in peace with himself and his environment.”(Anna Tardos).^{vii} The Pikler Institute as it was later called (or Lóczy after the street the nursery is situated on) has over the years become famous worldwide, for the quality of care and the health of the children who have lived there. The orphanage work has sadly ended this year, but the sessional day care and parent and child groups are expanding. The training programmes are continuing. Emmi Pikler died in 1984, but her work has been carried and developed by her daughter Anna Taros who now heads the team of doctors, psychologists and carers at the Institute.

Emmi Pikler was the first in her field to observe that babies and infants co-ordinate their physical movements, control their bodies and come up into standing entirely on their own, without adult help. She discovered that each and every child can only develop their full natural abilities for agility in gross and fine motor development, as well as their natural impulse for discovery, exploration and play, if given the freedom and space to move by their own initiative. Even more radically it seemed that “motor activity brings out the individual and the subjective..... a space where the psyche is going to unfold”.^{viii}

Pikler also discovered that this natural wisdom that motivates the young child to happily, and peacefully take control of their body, and then begin to explore and learn about their environment can only unfold when the child feels secure and safe in a loving and deeply respectful relationship with an adult carer, whether a parent or professional. (This incidentally was before the published discoveries of psychologists and researchers such as John Bowlby and the Robertsons). Emmi Pikler “taught the staff how to instill from day one of the infants life, a respectful dialogue of gesture, speech and attention. She thus created a ‘culture of ways’, to touch, to pick the infant up, to hold him in the arms, how to pay attention to him and how to respect his signals. The end result of this approach is the creation of a psychological space that optimizes the infants development, in whatever context he is growing up. (Anna Tardos^{ix}) It is the way in which a healthy and secure attachment is guaranteed. We now know through attachment research, that respectful care is internalized by the young child and provides the foundation for a healthy slowly emerging sense of self, which is fundamental for later self-esteem, resilience and ability to create and maintain relationship.

Emmi Pikler also understood that this essential relationship between child and carer is best developed during the times of bodily care – bathing, dressing, nappy changing, feeding and transitions in and out of sleep. And that these times need to be unrushed with the adult focused entirely on the wellbeing of the child. (This understanding is almost entirely counter-intuitive to our usual way of caring for young children, where the focus is on completing the tasks as quickly and efficiently as possible). Only then are the children able to settle happily and peacefully to times of quiet exploration and self initiated movement in a safe space, in earshot or sight of an adult, but without the adult’s need to be the initiator of play or entertainer. Through many years of close observation about how infants and toddlers play, the Pikler Institute has also developed practical knowledge about what play materials are most appropriate for different ages, how to feed children at different ages, how to help young children transition into a day care settings, how to work with conflicts between children and how to work with parents.

From an Anthroposophical view point, one can say that the Pikler approach demonstrates, in its practice, several important understandings about the needs of the very young child. For example, it clearly demonstrates a way to nourish and protect the 12 senses and particularly the four lower

senses of the young child – through respectful touch, caring for the sense of life, and promoting optimal environmental conditions for the development of the sense of movement and balance, as well as a protected environment which is respectful of the very young child’s sensory openness. The well developed higher senses of the carers provide an exemplary model for the very young child and ensure optimum healthy development on all levels. In her detailed indications for the careful training of her staff, Emmi Pikler mirrors Rudolf Steiner’s insistence that adults looking after the smallest children need to be the most highly skilled, awake, aware and loving. The children who experience this care and also watch the other children being cared for internalize these profoundly health giving gestures through the unconscious process of imitation. In her observations that the young child accomplishes walking, talking and thinking guided by an inner wisdom, it is evident that the Emmi Pikler understood the profound forces that Rudolf Steiner could so clearly see as the spiritual hierarchies directing the child’s will.

The rhythmical daily routine is another aspect of the Pikler approach, ensuring that each child is given unhurried time with their special carer at specific times throughout the day, whilst also giving time and space to move and play. This rhythm is different from the kindergarten rhythm and is supremely suited to the needs of the young child. What the anthroposophical understanding uniquely offers is manifold. For example, a full understanding of the importance of imitation, and the necessity that young children experience adults around them performing the tasks of everyday home life; the understanding of how to create a calm, beautiful, environment equipped with open-ended toys, and how bring the full richness of songs, stories and special occasions. The books “Home away from home” by Cynthia Aldinger and Mary O’Connell^x, Creating a home for Body, Soul and Spirit by Bernadette Raichle^{xi}, Nokken by Helle Heckmann^{xii} and more recently Touch and describe in detail the care models that are emerging. Quite simply, I feel that when Pikler and Steiner come together, quality of care cannot be bettered.

Recently an important booklet has been published by WECAN (Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America) called The Child from Birth to Three in Waldorf Education and Child care. The authors provide a concise summary of the Anthroposophical understanding of early child development and practical suggestions for the care of young children in an out-of-home setting. Much of what I was shown at the Pikler Institute and at Sophia’s Hearth is in the sections of this booklet dealing with the practical care of the young child. These Guidelines and also the publication “A Warm and Gentle Welcome, Nurturing Children from Birth to Three” compiled from the work of the WECAN RIE/Pikler Working group beautifully describe in more detail this coming together of an Anthroposophical understanding of the young child and the Pikler approach to child care. These publications are easily available to us in the UK and I feel are essential reading for anyone who has a wish to care for the very young child.

Earlier this year Judith Naisar from Vienna in Austria joined me to run three full day workshops at Steiner House in London called “Exemplary care of the Young Child”. In these workshops we were able to demonstrate, using Judith’s experience of setting up and running a nursery in Vienna, and my experience of working with parent and infants in York, how our work in the Steiner movement can be greatly enriched by the Pikler approach.

My work has profoundly changed since taking the Pikler training in Budapest at Sophia’s Hearth, New Hampshire. Releasing my Parent and Child group work, I have concentrated, over the last two

years, on developing Parent and Infant support groups. I call my approach "A Gentle Beginning". In these small weekly groups (8-10 parents and infants) I focus on encouraging parents to develop a co-operative relationship with their infants during times of bodily care and to give plenty of time and space for floor time, allowing their infants to move through the various developmental sequences to standing and toddling, without interference and at their own pace. We sit back, observe and thoroughly enjoy how helpless babies become happy, intrepid young explorers and experimenters. We have time for discussions about creating rhythm in the home, and all the knotty questions about sleep, weaning, toys, clothes.... We sing lullabies, nursery rhymes and introduce interactive songs and games. My Steiner Early Years teacher and parent and child group leader experiences, combined with the trainings I have recently taken, provide me with a huge store house of riches to draw from.

I have seen for myself the difference in the mobility and curiosity between the children who are reared within the prevailing cultural paradigm of being sat up early and spending much of the day in buggies, car seats and in front of TV screens, and the children who have had the freedom of self-initiated movement. I am heartened to read that Sally Goddard-Blythe gives value to importance of encouraging free movement and providing interactive songs and games in the first year in her recently published book called *The Genius of Natural Childhood*.

A professional accredited Training for carers of children from birth to three is being developed. It is planned that this training, will incorporate the Pikler approach, and neuroscience and attachment theory fully grounded in an anthroposophical understanding of the very young child.

In addition there is now a Pikler Level 1 course in the UK, held in York. The course covers the material that can be taken at the Pikler Institute in Budapest and is being given by Hedi Meyling, a Pikler pedagogue from Holland. My hope is that this will give more confidence to a cohort of experienced Steiner Early Years teachers wishing to develop Anthroposophical care for the very young child in this country. It will also create a unique opportunity for participants discuss together more deeply the ways in which the practical wisdom from the Pikler Institute can help inform Anthroposophical models of care for the very young child.

ⁱ Lifeways North America. www.lifewaysnorthamerica.org

ⁱⁱ Sophia's Hearth Family Center. www.sophiashearth.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Helle Heckmann. www.waldorflibrary.org/Journal_Articles/GW3903.pdf

^{iv} Der Hof. www.der-hof.de

^v Awhima day nursery. www.awhinachildren.co.nz/

^{vi} Emmi Pikler Haus, Berlin. www.emmi-pikler-haus.de in

^{vii} Anna Tardos, Introducing the Piklerian Developmental Approach, History and Principles. *The Signal*, Newsletter of the World Association for Infant Mental Health Vol 18 3-4 2010 p2

^{viii} Alberto Kinichkis, Being in Movement, *The Signal* Newsletter of the World Association for Infant Mental Health. Vol 18, 3-4 2010 p5

^{ix} Anna Tardos, op cit

^x Cynthia Aldinger and Mary O'Connell, Home Away from Home Lifeways Care of Children and Families

^{xi} Creating a home for body, soul and spirit. A new approach to child care. Bernadette Raichle WECAN 2012

^{xii} Nokken. A Danish approach to Waldorf based childcare. Helle Heckman WECAN 1990

A similar article is available in Kindling – The Journal for Steiner Waldof Early Childhood Care and Education
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