

Peace begins with babies



Peace may begin with babies, but it really begins with us. The peace in the adult is conveyed to the baby through words, looks, hands, and attitude. We can't pretend to feel peaceful when we don't. So we have to work on ourselves if we are to bring peace to babies. Gandhi said "We must be the peace we want to see in the world." I rephrased Gandhi's saying as, "We must be the peace we wish to see in children."

Peace is never a static condition—and it doesn't come from seeking. We don't find peace, we make it. There will always be problems, frustration, anger, and conflict, so instead of seeking peace, we need to make peace – and model peacemaking for children. The time to start is in infancy.

Pikler & peacemaking

Peacemaking is what I saw at the residential nursery at the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary. Started in 1946 by Dr. Emmi Pikler, a pediatrician, theorist, and researcher, the residential nursery lasted more than 60 years. The Pikler Institute continues today as a training and research facility under the direction of Dr. Pikler's daughter, Anna Tardos. Peacemaking is what I learned in Hungary and I also learned from Magda Gerber, a friend and colleague of Dr. Pikler and herself an expert in infant-toddler care. Gerber's organisation, Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) is still going strong and increasing in size in the USA and is also growing in New Zealand.

The Pikler/Gerber/RIE peacemaking approaches with babies tend to result in children who have a better than average chance of being:

- Self-confident, socially competent, and emotionally stable.
- Compassionate, assertive, nonviolent problem-solvers.
- Caring people – caring about themselves and others.
- Able to live cooperatively in families and communities.

Outcomes is a buzz word these days in the early care and education field. I link outcomes and images – so the list above contains my vision for infants. And I know that nobody can guarantee those outcomes, no matter how effective the approach they use.

Examples of approaches that lead to peacemaking outcomes

That said, I want to give examples from the Pikler/Gerber/RIE approaches that can and do lead to those outcomes. They involve caregivers:

- Forming close, lasting relationships through respecting the child as a full human being.
- Recognising that the family has a closer and longer lasting relationship than the caregiver and supporting that relationship
- Considering the essential activities of daily living as curriculum instead of chores. Those activities, such as nappy changing, are when the interactions are one-on-one and the relationships are built.
- Modeling gentleness, even in the face of aggression.
- Supporting and facilitating problem-solving—both physical and social problems.
- Allowing freedom of movement. This can't be emphasized enough. When babies are restricted, their sense of security and view of themselves as self-motivated learners is compromised. Emmi Pikler's original theory and her research focused on the benefits of unrestricted movement and its relationship to physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development.
- Encouraging authentic emotions and not trying to manipulate them.

More about feelings from Magda Gerber

Let me explain more about feelings – a lesson I learned from Magda Gerber. She pointed out how most adults are desperate to stop crying

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when it occurs so they use manipulation devices such as distraction or pacifiers. She taught her students to avoid manipulation and instead observe and talk to the baby to find out what was needed. Ask, “What do you need?” Empathy may help the adult discover the answer. The next step, of course, is to meet the need when possible. If that isn’t possible, Magda taught us to empathise and accept the unhappy feelings. It’s a strong message to let a child know that his feelings are felt by another and considered acceptable no matter what they are. How many of us are uncomfortable with our feelings as adults – especially the ones we consider negative? How might we be different if our early caregivers had known Magda Gerber?

In conclusion, there are multiple benefits in understanding and practicing the Pikler/Gerber/RIE approaches. I was already convinced of the benefits when I went to Budapest for the first time, but there was still something I didn’t know about. It took observing with my own eyes to see how infants and toddlers had the ability to get along with each other in a group. Talk about peacemaking! Magda told me about it, but seeing it made it real. Those children showed they cared about each other. You might even say they had a sense of community. I think that what I consider “advanced social development” or “peacemaking” happens because of the whole fabric of the approach. The threads of the fabric include:

- The training and support of the caregivers.
- The deep sense of security the children have in themselves and in their relationships with the caregivers.
- The power they feel in the predictability of the environment and the caregivers.



Building community is also directly addressed through believing in and promoting cooperation. I saw a beautiful balance of the group and the individual—the group was important but not at the sacrifice of the individual. The Pikler Institute is a peacemaking model for the world – not just for orphanages. I hope the ideas from the Pikler/Gerber/RIE approaches will spread so generations of babies will grow up to be skilled peacemakers! The world needs more peace!

Janet Gonzalez-Mena was a student of Magda Gerber in the San Francisco Bay Area back in the 1970’s and is a RIE Associate. From Magda, Janet learned about the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary. Intrigued with the theory, practice, and research of Dr. Pikler, Janet began her studies at the Institute in 2003 and has been there 5 times since for classes, observations and conferences. She is on the board of directors of the Pikler/Loczy Fund USA and a colleague of Laura Briley. Author of books and articles about infants and toddlers, early care and education, and diversity, Janet has a Master of Arts degree from Pacific Oaks College in Pasadena, California.



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- course and workshop descriptions should you want to **request professional development**
- a (growing) **archive of articles** to download and share with parents and teachers
- a **blog** for those who want to make childhood the best possible time for our little ones
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