

Getting to know you

“This mutual time of getting to know each other is what we call, ‘getting into the habit’, or ‘settling’.”

Dr Gabriella Püspöki, Emmi Pikler Institute

At the Emmi Pikler inspired Nest Private Kindergarten in Clive NZ, Kimberley Crisp and her team have found that the attention paid to ‘getting into the habit’ - or settling - is the most important investment they can make for each child. ‘Settling’ as a term, puts almost all of the onus for success on the child, with the implication that if the child doesn’t settle quickly and easily there is something wrong with him or her.

Conversely, ‘this mutual time of getting to know each other,’ or ‘getting into the habit,’ carries within the language the truth that this is a dynamic, a partnership. The implication is that as the senior partners in this enterprise, caregivers/teachers and parents are the parties who decide how well the stage is set for ‘getting to know each other’. And as we well know, ‘getting to know you,’ in any relationship, takes time.

At the 2009 NZCA conference Dr Gabriella Püspöki of the Pikler Institute in Budapest spoke about this process in her keynote speech. Many of their respectful settling practices at the Pikler Daycare Centre are not practiced here in New Zealand, although I believe children’s time in care would be immeasurably enhanced if they were.

In the beginning

Almost every parent who wants their child to attend the Pikler Institute Day Care knows of their work there, and they make their application with some expectations already. When the parents’ application is received, they are invited to a meeting with the Pedagogue (education director/head teacher) who clarifies for the parents what it is that their child would be part of.

- They discuss how their would children ‘live’ in the day care centre
- who would provide the care for their child
- and how and were the children eat, sleep and play.

In that first meeting the Pedagogue gives parents a detailed account about the daily routine and habits in the centre, explaining how they relate to the educational principles they hold and practice there. That way the parents understand clearly what the principles are, and why things are done the way they are.



At that first meeting the parents also meet the 'person of permanence' for their child, the person we in NZ would term the 'primary caregiver'. *"The Person of Permanence is a fundamental requirement in the daycare centre."* Unlike the children in the Pikler Infants' home where there is 24 hour care, *"the children in the daycare centre come from families where they live in intimate emotional relationships that last a lifetime - and this provides their sense of security."* The Person of Permanence *"has to facilitate it so that the child accepts them and the new environment. If this happens the children will not spend their time in the daycare centre wailing about the lack of the home ... but will spend their time actively and joyfully, and usefully from the point of view of their development."* In this Piklerian way of doing things, an 'unsettled child' reflects not on the child, but on the childcare staff and the efficacy of their practices.

Settling in - one at a time

They endeavour to work it so that there is only one child in the settling process at a time, *"because the presence of the parent can be unsettling for the others."* It is vitally important to have the parents' participation in this process. Creating emotional security is not primarily and exclusively the task of the caregiver, it is a joint effort between the parent and the caregiver.

There is not a set period of time for this process, but parents are informed during their first meeting with the Pedagogue that they will need to devote at least two weeks to it. It could turn out to take longer, the length of time depends on the particular child. It is a process of *"slowly and tactfully getting used to the new situation and new people, of creating a contact between their homes and the new world."*

The first day

The visit on the first day is kept very short, such a short time that it is not necessary to either feed or change the child, and of course, the parent is present the whole time.

The second day

On the second day the caregiver moves to be a bit closer to the Mother and child, allowing the child to become more aware of their presence. The pattern is to increase the amount of time that the child and parent spend at the centre each day. When judged ready, the parent will leave the child for a very short period, and subsequently, the length of the parent's absence is increased slowly.

The first change

When the child does need their first change, it is the parent who changes their child with the child's Person of Permanence alongside observing. The next change is done by the Person of Permanence while the Mother observes. The parent and the caregiver can then discuss what the child's routine is, what is done and why. *"If the Mother is making it 'a bit the other way,' we try to make it similar. Or if we can't make it because it is so wrong; some*

way, we try to explain why [we do it the way we do it] and ask the Mother to make it a 'bit the other way.'"

The child feels the trust

When the parent does the acts of care alongside the caregiver, and the caregiver does the acts of care alongside the parent, *"the caregiver can learn about the child and the child's habits, and the child can see and **feel** that his Mother trusts the caregiver, and passes him to her care."*

Stability and predictability

At the Daycare Centre the staff note that it is not as easy to create rituals, routines and spaces for stability and predictability as it is in their residential Infants Home, but they acknowledge that it is equally important to find ways to promote emotional safety. Accordingly, every child has their designated place at the meal table, and if a child is away unwell, their place remains empty. This sends the message to each child that they have a place, they belong.

Sleeping

They *"try sleeping in the daycare centre only in the second week because that is the hardest part of settling."* The parent always puts the child down for their first sleeps, and the parent is always there when they awake. *"We always ask the parent to bring with them the sleeping object, it means the connection with the family home."* When the child awakes to the parent, another firm foundation for trust has been laid. There is none of the terror of abandonment for the child, awaking in a strange place.

Getting to know you

Over this period a very very close relationship is being built between the Mother and the caregiver. In the emotional safety of this growing relationship the child *"gets to learn the habits of the daycare with the Mother's help, [and] the child's trust can be earned, which is indispensable for him to have a good time with us."* This close relationship between the parent and the caregiver is renewed *"every day with a meeting discussing what has happened for the child at home, and how he spends his day [at the centre], who he plays with for the longest time, how much he slept outdoors..."* It allows both parties to get to know the part of the child's life that they do not spend together. *"This is a very close connection between the Mother and the caregiver, and they discuss everything after every session"*, if there was crying, for how long? What reason? Why? How to resolve it?

The first time without Mum

When it is time to spend the whole period at the centre without Mum the day is chosen carefully. That first leaving never occurs on a Monday after the weekend, it occurs when the child looks settled in during the week. With such an incremental and measured building of relationships and trust, children are quickly emotionally safe, and this is evident in the quality of their attention to their freely chosen play activities.

Monthly & quarterly

The caregivers write a monthly summary about the development of each child which is forwarded to parents, and is often the focus of discussion about the child. Every quarter the parents and caregiver meet together. The caregivers write a development diary which they give to the parents and they discuss it together. *“In this way we can try to influence the behaviour of the Mothers.”*



Transcribed and written up from Gabriella Püspöki's keynote address at the New Zealand Childcare Association - Te Tari Puna Ora Conference, Auckland, NZ 12th July 2009, by Pennie Brownlee.