



Faster is *not* ***better***

Infants' natural gross movement development can be thwarted inadvertently by well-meaning carers – but this can be avoided with the Pikler approach, explains **Dorothy Marlen...**

There is a story of how Emmi Pikler, early in her career, spent a year with her husband at Trieste, Italy. At the beach she would watch parents with their children, observing how infants and young children were frequently put in positions that they were not naturally ready to find themselves – like being sat up or being held upright and 'walked'. Pikler saw this near universal practice as a deep mistrust of the natural capabilities of children to find these abilities themselves. She believed that all children have an innate body wisdom that naturally directs the unfolding of motor capacities.

When their daughter was born, Pikler and her husband took the unprecedented step of not interfering with their daughter's motor development in any way – for example, no 'tummy time', no propping or sitting her up, no putting her in a walker, and no holding her upright. They laid her carefully on her back on the floor at certain times of each day and let

her move and play freely without interference or interruption for as long as she wanted. What happened was that their child went through a progression of positions that included rolling, crawling, sitting, standing and walking without any help whatsoever. Pikler saw that her daughter did not have to be 'helped' with anything but naturally and gracefully came into walking entirely through her own efforts.

This experience informed Pikler in her practice as a family paediatrician in Budapest. She recommended to her parents that they not interfere with their children's natural motor development and it worked! The children in her care also came up into walking unaided, and were noticeably more balanced and agile. When Pikler opened her orphanage after WWII, this principle of allowing infants the freedom to engage in their own self-initiated movement and play was adhered to. This was an essential part of the care regime, along with the respectful care during times of bodily care discussed last issue. In fact, it was the secure attachment to a key carer and the high-quality and respectful care given, especially in times of bodily care, that provided the conditions for the child to feel secure and therefore content to engage in joyful self-directed movement, activity and play.

The orphanage, which closed two years ago, was in existence for over 60 years. During this

time detailed observations, videos and photographs were made of the children in the Institute in all stages of development. Sequences of movements and positions were discovered, including important transitional positions that had not been described before in early childhood development research (not discovered, perhaps, because children generally

PIKLER IN THE UK

The Pikler UK Association (visit pikler.co.uk) was launched in June 2014, and will soon have an online shop.

A new UK part-time Basic Pikler training will now start in September 2015. Visit the Pikler UK Association website for more details.

A new Level 3 EYE qualification called 'Holistic Baby and Child Care', which integrates Steiner Early Years Studies and the Pikler approach, is undergoing accreditation and is planned to start in April 2015. Visit www.emerson.org.uk/holistic-baby-and-child-care

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do not have the freedom to fully experience all the natural stages of motor development?).

Surprising discoveries

Perhaps the most surprising discovery made at the Pikler Institute was that if allowed full movement freedom, infants will, almost without exception, creep and/or crawl before they come naturally into the sitting position. In one study of 591 infants, on average (with a wide deviation) the children crawled at 44 weeks, sat and stood up at 49 weeks, took first steps at 15 months and walked with ease at 17 months. In all early years training literature in the UK it is assumed the normal sequence is sitting before crawling. Where did this 'fact' come from? Is it based on our cultural habit of sitting infants up before they find the sitting position themselves, from where they have to try to find the crawling sequence – sometimes giving up and bum shuffling instead? In my experience in four-and-a-half years of running parent and infant groups informed by the Pikler approach, with over 100 families passing through them, infants will self-discover the creeping and/or crawling sequences after rolling, and from there find a variety of sitting positions that they can get into and out of themselves. None of them have bum shuffled.

There is a wonderful side lying position (see bottom picture) that infants find and seem to



gain much pleasure in spending time in. This position is one of several that will only be found by the child if they are free to go through all the movement progressions naturally and aren't sat up. Unfortunately, in check lists on important developmental milestones this position is completely missed – perhaps because it is so rarely seen. Mastering transitional positions such as this, which require subtle weight shifts, is essential for developing balance, and a good indication that motor development is on track.

Research at the Pikler Institute shows that there is a large variation in time when individual infants master a particular position or sequence – and this is later than we expect in the UK, and obviously later than when they are put into the position by well-meaning adults. Without the Pikler reassurance based on years of detailed observation, there is the danger that out of an anxiety that children may fall behind officially set developmental milestones, they are 'helped' into positions before they are ready. If this happens important movements and positions may not be self-discovered let alone mastered. The child, rather than helped has been hindered in the unfolding of his natural capacities and also trust in his own body. The child needs to be allowed to go at his own pace. Faster is not better!

Trusting the infant

In the Western world, because of adult interference, the vast majority of infants are not given the opportunity to negotiate the full gross motor progressions from crawling to sitting, standing and walking. Sally Goddard Blythe has pointed out in her books and articles that if a child does not go through the full motor sequences there is a danger that primitive reflexes which should naturally fade by 6-12 months do not do so. This can cause difficulties in gross and fine motor coordination, sensory perception behaviour and other obstacles to learning later on. At the Pikler Institute primitive reflex retention was unknown! The development of balance gained through all the



sequences and transitional positions, such as the side lying position, goes hand in hand with the integration of primitive reflexes. And we cannot teach a child balance or reflex integration – they master everything through their own efforts. Allowing infants time to unfold their motor capacities could prevent many learning difficulties we see in primary schools.

A few suggestions

As well as advising parents and carers to respect and not interfere with the natural motor competencies of infants, it is also necessary to create an optimal environment for movement and play appropriate to each developmental stage. This includes:

- enough space for free movement and exploration. A child will not crawl in a cramped space;
- no support seats, 'walkers', 'excersaucers', etc.;
- placing simple play objects near the child on the floor (sitting a child in front of a treasure basket before it finds the sitting position herself can cause 'stuckness' and passivity);
- a hard, carpeted, not-slippery floor and appropriate equipment for crawling through and over;
- clothes that allow free movement (i.e. not designer jeans or frilly dresses);
- nappies that are not bulky – some prevent infants from rolling or bending their knees;
- a calm atmosphere.

And finally, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, the essential and primary importance of the respectful relationship with the key carer, ensuring trust and security which is the foundation for all free and joyful self-initiated activity.



about the author

Dorothy Marlen is a freelance early childhood trainer and consultant specialising in running introductory Pikler courses and offering support to parents and daycare centres. She is the course leader for the Holistic Baby and Child Care course.