

Respectful care is only fair

I remember what it was like before we adapted some of Pikler's ideas into our early childhood centre. The environment was far from peaceful with infants crying for attention and often looking a little lost due to not having developed a strong attachment with any of the adults in the environment. There was one person responsible for nappy changing each day and their job was to get through all the necessary nappy changes as quickly as possible. Meal times were absolute chaos with very little food actually consumed and much

of it ending up on the floor, all over high-chairs, and the faces and bodies of the children and teachers. We would plan "educational experiences" for these infants and toddlers such as putting paint out on the table. This paint would be used on everything except the paper provided and seemed to be a substitute for the food which wasn't being eaten at mealtimes. This was almost ten years ago in our early childhood setting and since then we decided there must be a more respectful and appropriate way to care for our youngest citizens. We were offering a watered-down pre-school curriculum to infants and toddlers and this was even less appropriate than offering a watered down college curriculum to new entrants. What we realised is that care is the curriculum for infants and toddlers. Things started to change when we began to truly respect the capabilities and individuality of each child. When we could take our time to change a nappy and have the same person spend proper quality time with each child. There are many years for our infants to learn what paint tastes like but at this early stage in their development it is far more important to learn to love and to be loved, to respect and be respected and this is our best chance to foster a shared sense of humanity. I am happy to share the practical guidelines we have developed after ten years of looking at infant care in more depth and sincerely hope these will be of practical use to teachers working with infants in group care settings.

Practical guidelines for implementation

The following guidelines constitute ways we can show our respect for infants in early childhood centres:

Recognising that infants need to develop a strong and reciprocal relationship with at least one other person in the environment and implementing a primary caregiver system to cater for that primary need.

The primary caregiver-child relationship is not an exclusive

relationship and nor is it a replacement for parents. On the contrary, primary caregiving involves a team approach and for a primary caregiving system to be effective it must be understood and supported by all members of the teaching team and all families who attend the centre. What needs to be understood is that an infant needs to form a strong relationship with at least one other person in the environment and the foundation of that relationship is reliant on continuity and trust. For infants, care and education are inseparable because valuable learning

is taking place during routine care times and this learning is hindered if the child does not have a strong reciprocal and consistent relationship with the person who is caring for them. In being cared for, the infant is learning to care for others. This is essentially the basis for a shared sense of humanity which will enable the infant to form and maintain relationships throughout his or her life.

Inviting infants' to engage and waiting for their approval prior to interacting with them.

Interactions should begin with some form of invitation by the teacher. This can take the form of a verbal invitation accompanied by outstretched open hands with palms facing up. After this initial verbal and physical invitation, the caregiver needs to wait for a response. Hammond (2009) advises:

When an adult speaks quietly about what is happening and waits for a response, the child does not need to be on alert that a change could be coming at any moment unannounced (p. 17).

An invitation and explanation is a simple matter of respect. Imagine being asked, being heard, and holding the power in matters affecting your physical well-being. For most adults this is accepted as a basic human right. Now imagine someone physically lifting or interfering with you in any way to which you have not consented. In the second instance, when you were not invited or consulted, the experience is one of powerlessness. You might feel more like an object rather than a human with individual thoughts, opinions, freedoms and rights.

Interpreting children's intentions by peacefully observing them and paying close attention to their body language, cues and gestures.

Through subtle signs and gestures in the presence of sensitive, attuned observers, even the youngest child can express his or her opinion and therefore have his or her human rights upheld (United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2003).



It is through observation that teachers learn what the child wants, needs, likes, dislikes and also what they are capable of and what their emerging capabilities are. This peaceful observation enables teachers to go further than feeling empathy. They go beyond “what would I want if I were her?” to actually consider “what does she want?”

Slowing down and recognising that infants may prefer an unhurried approach to their individual care routines, learning and development. Being flexible about breaks and making them work according to the needs and rhythms of the infants as opposed to working by the clock.

In order to give infants unhurried time, teachers have to make a commitment to slow down and be emotionally present with infants (Kovach & Da Ros-Voseles, 2008). This provides the child valuable, uninterrupted, quality time and attention. When we do this we demonstrate our ability to empathise with the infant and understand from his perspective what the experience of going to sleep / changing a nappy / having a meal at the centre must feel like. This practice of taking adequate time deepens teachers’ awareness and knowledge of each child, sensing by their behaviour, body language and expressions.

When we give our time we show value for the person with whom we are engaged. When we rush an interaction we run the risk of leaving the person with whom we are interacting feeling unsatisfied and undervalued by the experience. Each child will have his or her own rhythm and pace. Respectful practice involves stepping out of our own rhythm and pace and adjusting to that of the infant. For adults generally this is going to mean slowing down a great deal in order to observe and interpret needs, invite children to engage, wait for their response and then engage in the interaction at the child’s pace.

Offering infants choices about what is happening for them and waiting for a response to the choices offered.

At mealtimes there were always choices for food prepared by the cook so teachers could cater to children’s individual tastes. Also choices about when children were hungry and wanted to eat were decided by the child. Teachers would offer food and if it was not accepted they would put it away to offer later.

Teachers at the case study centre felt that offering children choices was an essential element of their philosophy and practices. Below are examples of the centre manager’s opinion on the subject of choices:

It is important to offer children choices. You know especially infants – they don’t get a lot of choice about anything really. So offering them a choice in anything that involves them gives the power over to them. They can see and feel how powerful they are in decisions which directly affect their wellbeing (Huia: teacher interview).

Talking to them about what is going to happen next and giving

them the opportunity to respond and be a willing participant. Giving children choices (particularly infants who are often overlooked in this area), they will soon get the idea that their opinion is valued (Huia: teacher interview).

I agree with Brumbaugh (2008) who sums up why it is important to offer children choices succinctly:

Giving children choices shows them that educators care. When educators trust children to make choices concerning their daily events and activities, they not only create a sense of autonomy, but also an environment of respect (p. 175).

Being available to the infant and supporting them in their learning, but resisting the urge to intervene unnecessarily in their problem-solving efforts and mastery of their own physical development.



Infants are capable of solving their own problems and having opinions. As the responsible adult we can be tempted to rush in and ‘save’ the child when he or she looks challenged. These are the moments we need to really challenge our own understanding of what it means to be a teacher in early childhood. Being close by and supportive but allowing an infant the space and time to learn for herself will prove more valuable than ‘helping’ her by intervening in her learning. Support rather than intervention is a mark of respect for the child. Adults generally try to do too much for children and this can have a damaging affect on the child’s perception of themselves as confident and competent learners.

Recognise the need for a strong philosophy and deep level of respect among team members.

You can accomplish more and achieve greater quality for the benefit of the infants in your care when you share the same goals as a team, communicate effectively and demonstrate respect for one another.

The teachers at the case study centre have a vision about how their centre should feel and what experiences will be like for infants and toddlers who come to their centre. The most important part of realising this vision is that every one of the teaching team shares the vision. Part of the philosophy with children is that teachers trust them to be confident and competent learners but the first level of trust necessary within the environment is among the adults who work as a team.

Ten years ago our child care centre was a place of frustration for teachers and children. Today it is truly a home away from home. It is a place where infants and their families feel warmly welcomed, valued and respected. Now, thanks to the ideas we have adapted from Pikler, we are confident that caregiving is our curriculum and this is exactly as it should be for children who are spending time outside of their own homes when they are so young. Our teaching team have developed and researched their ideas and more can be found about our approach at www.childspace.co.nz