

# Respectful mealtimes

Mealtimes can be viewed as the most important period of a child's day in a daycare setting, which is reflected in the Pikler approach, where they are seen as times for establishing trust and attachment.



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**T**HIS ARTICLE explores how it is possible to create calmer and more pleasurable mealtimes for infants and toddlers in daycare settings. It follows on from my article introducing the Pikler approach, *Respect, Care and Wisdom* in the October 2014 issue.

## A summary of the Pikler approach to childcare

Dr Emmi Pikler (1902-1984) created an exemplary approach to childcare in Budapest, Hungary, first with families in her care as a paediatrician and then at the orphanage she created after World War Two. The focus of care at the Pikler Institute was for children younger than three-years-old, and it ran successfully for 60 years.

Pikler proved that children who spent their first years in an institution could grow into mentally healthy and happy adults. This was possible because carers were carefully trained to give care and nurture based on the principles of respect towards each child and trust in their innate competencies.

The orphanage closed two years ago but the Pikler Institute continues to run daycare, parent and child groups and courses for professionals, who come from all over the world to learn about this peace-filled and profoundly mindful approach. The Pikler approach was taken to the USA by Magda Gerber who founded Resources for Infant Educators (RIE). The Pikler approach has been successfully introduced into family life and childcare in various countries around the world.

The principles of respectful care, particularly during times of bodily care, creates a core of trust and calmness in the child, which allows the child to confidently and fully explore the 'self' and the environment. The two principles are interconnected. 'The end result of this approach is the creation of a psychological space that optimizes the infant's [and toddler's] development, in whatever context he is growing up.'

## Respectful mealtimes

### Stress filled or pleasure filled?

In consultancy visits to daycare centres, I observe that lunchtime, especially in the infant and toddler rooms, can be the most stressful times of the day. Hungry and tired very young children waiting for their meal, followed by over-stretched staff trying to

feed all the children at the same time. This type of scenario can challenge the most experienced of carers and, of course, is often stressful and unsatisfactory for the children. By applying the principles of the Pikler approach there is the possibility that mealtimes can be made more calm and pleasurable for the children and the staff.

### Pleasure as the overriding aim

In settings based on the Pikler approach, meal times, like other times of bodily care, are seen as 'the' primary times of establishing good attachment and trust with each individual child. Mealtimes are a most important event in a day of a young child in daycare.

Mealtimes provide a crucial anchor and comfort in a sometimes confusing and busy day. How comforting and pleasurable a child experiences mealtimes is highly dependent on how much the child trusts the carer, the carer's ability to pick up the child's cues, and how calm and predictable the situation is, quite apart from how the food tastes. The main objective of the Pikler approach is to create a pleasurable experience for the child, because if this aspect of the care is successful it is more likely that the child will be more settled and happy.

Remembering that the Pikler approach is a 'culture of ways', which need to be seen as a whole, it is helpful to highlight some useful and surprising aspects of the Pikler approach to creating pleasurable mealtimes.

### Key worker approach

Although not named as 'key workers', as such, the success of the Pikler approach in care settings depends on every child having a special carer. The carer is responsible for several children and she will be the one who changes their nappies, oversees the nap time and who also accompanies their main mealtime.

This is especially important for the younger members of a care group and those who are new to the setting. Carers in a daycare group work as a strong team together, with plenty of time set aside for mutual feedback and reflection. The children need to be very well known to all the carers.

Infants and children are fed individually by their special carer up until they are able to eat independently, when they are fed in a group. This means that mealtimes are staggered for the children, with the younger infants and toddlers being fed and put down individually for their naps in turn. New

photo courtesy of Dorothy Marlen



*During mealtime in a Pikler setting, the child is learning calm pleasure, self-regulation and independent eating skills using real equipment*

children, even if older, may also have mealtimes alone with their special carer until they are more confident with other children.

#### **A quiet, comfortable place for feeding**

The infant or young toddler, who is not able to feed themselves independently, will be fed in the carer's lap away from noise and distractions. Special care is taken to ensure that the carer is very comfortable. This might mean finding pillows to support the back and arms and a stool or cushion to support the feet. They are then more able to settle to the task of giving full attention to the child and creating a calm and pleasurable space for feeding.

There is no rush. The child is told what is happening at each stage of the process – for example, putting on the bib and washing hands – and they are invited to take an active part in preparing the feeding time as much as they are able. The carer then gives full and quiet focus to the child during the feed.

#### **Slow and steady progress to independence**

The infant will either be given a bottle, or if ready and able, a small glass with curved edge to feed from. Sippy cups are not used unless the child can only drink this way. The child is supported to progress from the bottle to being able to help direct the glass

and, finally, to fully and independently using the glass themselves. During the weaning, a savoury puree may be gradually introduced, spooned from a cup. The child is taught eating skills using real equipment, because the child is trusted to respect them.

The carer is quietly attentive to the child's cues, feeding rate and preferences and will stop the meal when the child has had enough. Not one mouthful more than the child wants. Learning to eat is a slow process, needing calm and concentration. The adult determines each step but constantly listens to the child's need.

As much as possible, the setting will try and accommodate the likes and dislikes of each child, especially when they are new to the setting. The child is learning calm pleasure, self-regulation and independent eating skills using real equipment. The child is trusted to learn to use them. They are also building a trusting relationship with their main carer.

If something is not working there is the flexibility to go back a step or two. The relationship and the pleasurable experience are more important than reaching milestones and benchmarks.

#### **Learning to eat**

In the Pikler approach, mealtimes are for eating and learning to eat with pleasure in a socially acceptable



The objective is to create a calm and cheerful event while keeping clearly defined limits and expectations around safety and respect

way – therefore, learning to drink from a real glass and to eat cleanly with a spoon from a bowl are encouraged. It all takes time though. There are ground rules to socialised eating that need to be gently learned and food time as ‘play time’ is seen as confusing this aim. However, as in Baby-Led Weaning (BLW), the mealtime is child-led, with the child controlling the process and self-regulating how much they eat.

In my consultative visits to daycare settings I may see infants and toddlers being fed the BLW way, in high chairs, in a group all at the same time. The children may be left to feed themselves. The opportunity for relationship building and learning eating skills with the carer may be missed.

### When is a child ready to sit and eat independently?

In the Pikler approach, the child may transition to eating their meals independently at a Pikler ‘bench’ when they can sit and support themselves and can drink from a glass unaided. This happens around 14 to 16-months-old, depending on various factors. The bench is a free standing child-sized chair and table that is one unit, where the child/s feet reach the ground when sitting. They can get in and out of the bench by themselves.

The emerging toddler’s need to feel competent and self-determining is deeply respected and the bench supports this need. It is seen as a much more preferable alternative to a high chair where the child is ‘trapped’, or a chair where they cannot reach their feet to the floor and have to be strapped in.

The carer, at first, continues to be with the child ‘one to one’, sitting opposite the child, at the child’s level, until they are fully able to use a cup, spoon and bowl alone. Then the child will start to eat with a small group of children of similar ages, at a larger child-sized table with individual stools for sitting on. They each have a sitting place that is always theirs!

They now learn to enjoy the social aspects as well as the ground rules of eating together at a table, with the carer eating with them. The main objective is to create a calm and cheerful event for everyone while keeping clearly defined limits and expectations around safety and respect.

## Key points

- Mealtimes play an important part of any child’s day, especially in daycare settings
- In the Pikler approach, mealtimes are seen as a time for respect, of meeting the child’s needs, and for enjoying the social aspects of food and mealtimes

## Case study

### Childspace in New Zealand

Childspace is a daycare setting in New Zealand that has embraced the Pikler approach, including the ways mealtimes are given. The photograph for this article was taken there. Their website can be found at [www.childspace.co.nz](http://www.childspace.co.nz).

An information sheet about mealtimes given to parents says: ‘Mealtimes are one of the times that teachers and children get guaranteed one-on-one time. Because one-on-one time is so important for the relationship and building trust we value this time together.’

## Conclusion

Because the Pikler approach is only now beginning to be known in the UK, there are no daycare settings in this country where Piklerian ‘pleasurable’ mealtimes can be observed in practice. Carers need to be carefully trained and it takes time and commitment to create a robust ‘culture of ways’ in a setting. However, there are individual daycare settings in the UK that are beginning to explore the Pikler approach with the support of trained advisers, and training in the Pikler approach is now available (see below).

Mealtimes in daycare settings, although perhaps not a highlight in the *Early Years Foundation Stage*, lie at the deep heart of the care experienced daily by every child in daycare. The Pikler approach, with its emphasis on creating respectful relationships, can perhaps bring new insight into this most important part of the day.

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## Useful resources

- The World Association of Infant Mental Health newsletter SIGNAL 18 (3-4) July-December 2010. This issue was dedicated to the Pikler approach.
- *Bringing up and providing care for infants and toddlers in an institution* by Anna Tardos. Published by Pikler-Lóczy Társaság, Budapest, Hungary.
- *Being with Infants and Toddlers: A curriculum that works for caregivers* by Beverley Kovach and Susan Patrick. Published by LBK Publishers.
- *Authentic Relationships in Group Care Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) Principles into practice* by Stephanie Petrie and Sue Owen (Eds). Published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers (ISBN: 9781843101178).
- *Mealtimes at Childspace* – word doc available on request from [www.childspace.co.nz](http://www.childspace.co.nz)
- [www.thepiklercollection.weebly.com](http://www.thepiklercollection.weebly.com) information on the Pikler approach
- [www.pikler.co.uk](http://www.pikler.co.uk) (UK Pikler Association – events and online bookshop)

### Pikler training

- UK Basic Pikler training – [www.pikler.co.uk](http://www.pikler.co.uk)
- Level 3 Holistic Baby and Childcare (Steiner Early Childhood Studies with the Pikler approach).
- [www.emerson.org.uk/holistic-baby-and-child-care](http://www.emerson.org.uk/holistic-baby-and-child-care)