

caregiving with respect: important lessons from the Pikler Institute

by Elsa Chahin

At the World Forum in Kuala Lumpur on May 2007, the title of our workshop was “Caring for Children Who Are Orphans.” Sharing the session with three other early childhood professionals from Malawi, Indonesia, and Singapore, Laura Briley, President of the Pikler/Loczy Fund USA, and I spoke on the topic of The Pikler Approach. The majority of the participants had never heard of the Pikler Institute which is a residential nursery founded by Dr. Emmi Pikler in 1946 in Budapest, Hungary. What they gathered from our presentation was that it is possible to create a loving environment for children who live in institutions where they can thrive and foster nurturing relationships between the adult and the child.

Laura stated, “It all starts with training the caregivers on how to better care for children with respect.” A one-week intensive seminar at the Pikler Institute in Budapest was organized. Thanks to the generous support and collaboration of the World Forum Foundation, The Pikler/Loczy Fund USA embarked on its



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fundraising efforts to give training scholarships.

A trip to Budapest

In October, 2007, thirteen of us met at the doors of the Pikler Institute where Anna Tardos, daughter of Dr. Pikler, and her team welcomed us. As we each introduced ourselves we realized that in such a small group we were representing seven countries and five religions. Despite the cultural differences, it was clear that we all shared one commonality: our love of children and our commitment to improving their quality of life. “The pleasure of being together is the most important thing,” said Anna Tardos with a Hungarian accent in her opening remark. She wasn’t referring to our small group of participants, but to the adult-child relationship. A child needs to feel that:

- he/she belongs
- he/she is being cared for
- he/she matters
- each interaction is filled with pleasure, and
- it feels good to be cared for!

The adult’s role is to meet the child’s needs, not just the physical, but the emotional ones as well. “During care, it is important to satisfy the internal needs of

the child — when we bathe, feed, change clothes, etc. — it isn’t only a biological need that is being addressed,” added Anna.

Caregiving with respect

We all observed this at the Pikler Institute. Children are considered active participants in their care from their youngest age, never passive objects or mere recipients of care:

- they are involved
- they interact
- they give cues to which the attentive caregiver responds
- they are engaged through dialogue and a gentle slow pace that uniquely adapts to each child’s innate rhythm.

For example, in a video of a caregiver and a toddler, the caregiver allows the child to try to put on his shoe on his own, but she doesn’t leave him alone to do it. She assists him, and if the child cannot do it, she finishes. “It is not about independence,” said Anna, “it is about interdependence, and the adult being present for that child.”

Indeed, all of the children living at the Pikler Institute are cared for with respect. The children:

- feel a strong connection and attachment with the adult that cares for them

- feel part of a group
- are learning to wait for their turn!

Yes, although all of them would love to have a bath that lasted more than the approximate 22 minutes allotted for each child, they are learning to feel empathy from a young age. They are learning that just as much as they love to be in the arms of their caregiver Mary, so do Lazlo, and Milos, and the other children that make up the group of eight.

A very important aspect of the Pikler Approach is consistency. Children need a routine. For children in institutions particularly, a routine gives them a renewed sense of order and predictability that allows them to develop trust. They come to trust that their needs will be met. The order of the children is always respected.

“But how can these women be so peaceful when interacting with each child?” asked a gentleman from our group who directs a home for HIV orphans in México. Anna stressed the importance of a thorough training of the caregivers (or ‘nurses’ as they are referred to at the Institute) as she quoted her mother:

“Hands constitute the infant’s first connection with the world. Hands pick her up, lay her down, wash and dress her, and even feed her. What a different picture of the world an infant receives when quiet, patient, careful, yet secure and resolute hands take care of her — and how different the world seems when these hands are impatient, rough, or hasty, unquiet, and nervous. In the beginning hands are everything for an infant. The hands are the person, the world.”

Learning to hold an infant

The caregivers are trained to hold the infants at the Pikler Institute in the same

manner, with the same choreographed movements; each baby, therefore, can become comfortable in this way of being held and can anticipate what will come next. This predictability allows the child to feel secure because of the element of familiarity. Within the learned way of holding the child, the adult has her own freedom to interact in a natural fashion. She is constantly bathing the child with language. Her soft voice is soothing and reassures the child that she is present for him.

Anna invited one caregiver to come to our classroom and demonstrate the way in which babies are held at the Institute. We all took turns practicing this particular way of holding a baby; and even though we were holding dolls, we could feel a sense of peace and presence when being asked to talk to the ‘baby.’ We had a purpose, we weren’t carrying a baby mechanically, we were involved, we were learning to make a difference through our touch.

Throughout our seminar we had been bathed with intellectual knowledge by Anna Tardos and her team regarding infant development and the 60 years of research done at the Institute. We were infused with mental concepts that didn’t just stay in our heads. I had the honor of being invited to lead the group everyday through a series of sensory awareness exercises that I had learned from my mentor Ute Stub, a physical therapist from Berlin, and colleague of Dr. Emmi Pikler. The purpose of these ‘experiments,’ as Ute calls them, is to integrate the information into the body so there can be a mind-body connection, and therefore a complete understanding and personal interpretation of the information shared.

Sharing our intentions

The time came to pack our bags and prepare for our journey back home: Indonesia, Singapore, Israel, Tanzania,

Belize, México, and the United States. Before we bid farewell, I led the group in a last experiment. Because we had gotten to understand the importance of our hands as caring adults, the relevance of our consistent nurturing touch, and had internalized this awareness, I invited the group to gather in a circle and cup their hands as to symbolize a bowl. I asked them to set an intention and encouraged them to pour this gift into the ‘bowl’ of the person next to them without any spoken words. Each took their time reflecting, conveying the message in their hands, and eventually passing this energy to the person next to them. We created a circle where we all shared this new-found knowledge and commitment. We were no longer individuals standing alone with a common mission of improving the lives of children; we were a collective. We were experiencing the interdependence Anna had talked about. We knew we shared a life purpose and our tears served as a sweet expression of compassion and support.

A better world for children

Budapest has given us many lessons, and many opportunities of hope. It is now up to us to reflect on what we observed, and possibly share what we have learned. Our lives were touched in a beautiful way thanks to the devoted and dedicated professionals that work at the Pikler Institute; and we will always be grateful to them for sharing their knowledge on how to better care for babies with respect.

There is so much to be learned from this residential nursery in Budapest. In as little as one week we all came out of this experienced, renewed, and optimistic. “It is possible to make a difference in a child’s life,” said one of the women in our group that oversees 19 residential nurseries in her country. It is possible to create a nurturing environment for children where they can prosper and

grow into confident, well adapted individuals; and it starts with us: the adults who care for them. It is possible to influence the life of one child in a positive way. We can create a better world for children, and it can happen if we do it one child at a time.

Two Opportunities to Learn about Pikler Approach

#1 – Support and Cooperation with Educarers and Families

October 6 - 7, 2008 • Pikler Institute, Budapest, Hungary

The Pikler Institute will be offering a two-day workshop for those who already have some experience with the Piklerian early childhood care and education approach. The following topics will be presented and discussed in detail:

How to cooperate with families in a day care center and how parent-infant groups ('classes') can support the parents. We will discuss how the Piklerian approach can help support parents who have difficulties with their children. We will also help answer questions of how to support caregivers, educators ('educarers') in the upbringing of children. We will help caregivers in understanding the importance of the free movement and playing activity of infants and young children, and how they can learn to be attentive and respectful during the care situation with each individual child.

Only a very limited number of participants can take part in the course, applications are accepted in order of the transfer of payment. The fee for the two-day training is Euro \$260,-/person.

#2 – Introduction to Piklerian Early Childhood Education Approach

October 8, 2008 • Pikler Institute, Budapest, Hungary

In connection with the Step by Step conference, there is an opportunity for a one-day English language general introduction to the Piklerian early-childhood pedagogy. For the Introductory Information Day we expect the application of those who are interested, and who would like to gain information directly from the Pikler Institute in Budapest.

During the course we will discuss the value of self-initiated movement and play activity, its inner characteristics and development. We shall also talk about the less-known aspect of Piklerian pedagogy – the importance of careful and attentive physical care, its basic principles, and the actual components of the 'technique.'

We ask application and payment in advance. The participation fee is Euro \$50,-/person.

For detailed information, please inquire at pikler-tardos@t-online.hu or at the Pikler Institute, Loczy Lajos u. 3, H-1022 Budapest, Hungary, or by fax at (+36) – 1 – 212 – 4438

Visit www.WorldForumFoundation.org/issa OR communicate directly by writing pikler-tardos@t-online.hu for more detailed information.

"The mission of the Pikler/Loczy Fund USA is to actively support the work of Dr. Emmi Pikler and the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary. They want to inspire adults to the wonder and harmony of a close and personal relationship with infants and toddlers based on the Pikler Approach in home and group settings. Their commitment to service, training, and research demonstrates their belief that all children have the right to be respected as competent and autonomous individuals by a caring adult."