

PARENT AND INFANT GROUPS INFORMED BY THE PIKLER APPROACH

A Personal View by Dorothy Marlen

Having trained as a kindergarten teacher twenty years ago I almost immediately stepped sideways into supporting parents, particularly through parent and child (P&C) group work. Four years ago I took another sideways step into supporting parents and infants in their first 18 months of life, influenced by my training in the Pikler Approach from Hungary. I am beginning to understand how different supporting parents and babies in groups can be from Steiner P&C groups (parents with children up to three or four years old) and what the benefits are of having this special support for parents and infants based on the Pikler approach.

Background to developing the parent and infant groups

My step sideways into parent and infant group work was prompted by three main experiences. The first was participating in the trainings at the Pikler Institute in Hungary. It was as though a curtain had been pulled aside and I was shown the deep wisdom which the very young child brings into life, and also what respectful care looks like in practice. It transformed my understanding of the very young child and I saw how the Pikler approach could bring much needed help to parents in the first year.

My second experience was taking a Professional Development Course at Sophia's Hearth in Keene, NH, USA. There, Steiner pedagogy and the Pikler approach are woven together, and I saw in practice how these groups had a very different emphasis from the conventional Steiner P&C group model.

My third experience was completing a Post Graduate Diploma in Psychoanalytic Child Observational Studies. I undertook an observational study of my own practice in P&C groups. What I discovered from these was that although the P&C work is rich and very fulfilling, neither the parents nor I had the time or space in the groups to really take in the amazing unfolding of abilities that were happening in the youngest children right in front of us. In addition, the mixed group of children from birth to three in the same room meant that the infants often had restricted opportunities to roll, crawl, and play freely on the ground because of the presence of toddlers. It was the older children who were able to join in the crafts and appreciate the singing and story time in a P&C group. The layout of the room and the choice of toys were also often arranged for these older active adventurers. On top of this, there was little time to focus in on the needs and questions of the new parents.

I had learned through my observational studies about the positive effects of taking time to observe children - this is the only way we get to know each individual child and his/her particular needs and interests. Our presence has a nourishing, healing

effect, and our warm, interested but non-interfering gaze reassures young children and provides a safe space, a 'container' where they feel free to move and play according to their own impulses.

I can now see the benefits of having special sessions for parents with infants that are separate from P&C groups. This first 18 months of life is very much a realm unto itself and the foundation of all that will follow. Enormous changes take place, not only in the children's physical, emotional, and cognitive development, but also in their relationship with their parents and in the parents' confidence in themselves. These changes are much easier to respond to and support in a group where the emphasis is on nurturing a joyful, co-operative partnership between the parent and the infant on



the one hand, and allowing self-initiated play and physical development on the other - the two main principles of the Pikler approach.

The main differences between the parent and infant groups and Steiner parent and child groups

The most immediately discernible difference between the groups is the lack of crafting, snack time, puppet stories and festivals. This may seem a travesty when these activities are so beloved by parents who discover Steiner Waldorf P&C groups. However, just as the baby needs the first few months to discover his hands and feet without the distraction of baby gyms and mobiles, so the new parent needs the first year to discover her baby without additional activities. As an infant needs to experience the simple calm rhythm of a day, so the parent and infant groups reflect this simplicity. It is only in toddlerhood that the young child begins to enjoy and understand the rhythm and repetition of more complex activities including the differentiation of activities in the days of a week. One of the most common comments by parents is the relief in finding a group for themselves and their baby that is calm, simple and not activity driven.

The Pikler approach and the lemniscate of care

At the heart of parent and infant group work are two principles that the Pikler Institute has beautifully developed and demonstrated in the care of young children. I have called this the lemniscate of care. This is the need for a balance between two primary needs of the very young child: the need for attachment and relationship with the parent/carer, which is best nurtured and developed during times of bodily care, and the need for times of auto-

mous self-initiated movement and play. The 'secure base' provided by a strong and joyful attachment to the parent or primary carer is the essential basis for infants' confidence to explore and play by themselves. The latter is dependent on the former.

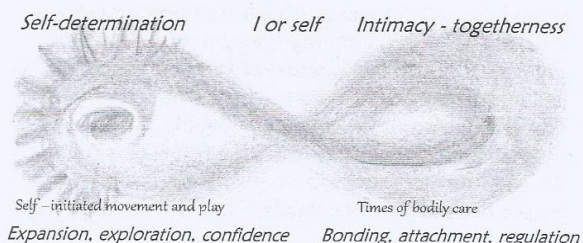
The nurturing and protection of the four bodily senses which Rudolf Steiner states is so essential in the first eighteen months of life is achieved through balancing these needs. The senses of touch and life are cultivated with gentle and respectful bodily care, and the senses of balance and movement in the gradual mastering of the physical body, which the infant, by necessity, has to accomplish on his own. An understanding of these dual needs of the infant can be of immeasurable help to 'a new parent'. Avoiding the many traps of contemporary parenting, (including the buying equipment, and the belief that the child needs to be held and entertained most of the time) can also be supported.

What Emmi Pikler focused on and her highly trained carers demonstrated is a quality of awareness, warmth and presence in the adult toward the child, (requiring consciousness of the higher social senses described by Rudolf Steiner), and known today as 'Respectful Care'. Now being more fully explored and articulated by researchers of 'attachment', respectful care ensures a joyful and healthy bond between carer and infant. It includes: gentle touch; eye contact; authentic and simple conversation which engages the infant as a co-operative partner in the tasks of bodily care; a participating 'with' rather than doing 'to'; and slowing down and experiencing the times of bodily care as times for building relationship rather than just getting the task done. When the potential of respectful care is understood, there can be immediate changes in the quality of care and the parent-infant relationship, which bring a new and sometimes unexpected joy. They represent for parents a waking up and breaking through to a new level of awareness. Parents attending the groups have appreciated the understanding that it is possible to have a co-operative relationship with their baby from birth and that it can be joyfully developed during times of bodily care.

The role of the group leader and the aims of the group

The group leader models respectful care at every opportunity, being always sensitive to strengthening the parents' self-confidence and their own particular relationship to their child, which is holy. This modelling is offered in all interactions with the infants from when they are very young to when they are verging on toddlerhood when respectful resolution of conflict can also be demonstrated. In addition lending articles and the viewing of DVDs demonstrating respectful care in parent evenings can help parents by giving time and space to reflect on

what respectful care can be in practice in their own families. The group leader's calmness, care and presence creates a safe 'container' for parents and children, so that the parents can relax, which means the infants can also relax. The leader provides the input for the whole group on one side of the respectful



care lemniscate through on going modelling.

The other side of the lemniscate – the need for children to move and play without interference - is demonstrated in the group by giving time for quiet observation of the children. The groups are eight parents at the most, which allows everyone to get to know each other and be interested in each other's child. The parents are encouraged to lay their infants on their backs in front of them, and depending on their stage of development, place appropriate toys within reach. For babies up to three months, no toys are necessary as the most important task of this period is the finding of hands and feet. Emmi Pikler suggested that the handkerchief is the most popular first toy. Then, as fine motor skills progress, simple everyday objects of different materials are introduced. As the infants progress in their skills and interests, the toys in the group space are changed, and eventually small climbing structures are introduced. Gradually the infants, of their own accord, will turn to the side and eventually find their way onto their tummies, into crawling, then sitting and standing.

Here the leader's role is to supervise the play, keep it safe, feed back to parents about their development and demonstrate respectful ways of resolving conflict between the children. Watching this process, where the physical will of the infant is so evident, is awe-inspiring. The groups are mixed in age, which has its advantages. The new parents get to see the progression of the older infants. The parents with the older infants can encourage the newer parents, e.g. to stay with the process and not put their infant in a position she cannot get into herself, but to allow the natural unfolding of gross and fine motor development to progress without interference.

The special role of the groups in facilitating full movement development.

What is witnessed in the parent and infant group sessions, in the gradual unfolding and increasing complexity of the mastering of motor skills, is a clear picture of the incarnating human being. When un-interfered with, the progress of inhabiting and gaining control of the physical body has an archetypal

precision over the weeks and months, although each child will master new movements in their own time. There is nothing random in the way an infant methodically and with fearless curiosity, slowly gains control of her limbs and then the properties of materials and objects in the physical world. In the weekly observation in the group, each infant's innate miraculous wisdom is brought into the light. It would be impossible not to feel a reverence for each and every child, as they all undertake the same journey of the first year in their own individual way. It is the hero's journey into the world! Even if subjects such as 'incarnation' or 'spirit' are not easily discussed, every parent begins to see the infants (their own and others in the group) with a new level of awareness, awe, respect, and love.

These groups provide a special opportunity for parents to learn to allow their infants to experience full gross and fine motor progression and in this process achieve full primitive reflex integration. What is offered is very different from what culturally we do with infants, particularly with regards to sitting them up before they can find the sitting position themselves, and the habit of putting them in contraptions where they are trapped and passive. For instance, in the 'baby-led weaning' method of feeding a child, parents are encouraged to put their children into a sitting position, with the goal that they can do this independently by 5-6 months, when progression on to solid foods begins. Naturally, however, an infant will come to the sitting position by themselves at 7-9 months. This one piece of advice in service of baby-led weaning may have an enormous influence on whether a child goes through all the gross motor sequences. I observe that if infants have been sat up early, they can be reluctant to lie on their backs, may often sit passively with splayed legs and can find it very difficult to find their way into the crawling stages that are so important for full reflex integration and brain development. A child who has come to sitting naturally will have many positions that they can easily move in and out of. They are free to move as they wish.

Children who come to the standing position on their own, without being held or 'walked' will often do this later than those who have been helped. This can be a testing time for the parents going the Pikler way, as there can often be a worry that their children are falling behind in their development. Here again over 50 years of meticulous observation of children's gross motor development at the Pikler Institute provides guidance, reassuring parents that there can be many months difference in individual progression and that earlier is not better. Holding back and not interfering is rewarded when parents see how easily and confidently their infant stands up and walks all by themselves.

Apart from observing the infants, there is time in the groups for sharing the questions, worries, and joys of early parenthood. There is also time to sing

nursery and other interactive rhymes at the end of each session and these too change as the children get older. Parents might stay with the group for over a year, until their child is toddling well and ready to move into the P&C groups. The group is a safe 'container', where parents can make friends and find support in the warmth and sharing of each one's journey. They often meet together outside the group and the friendships made are very strong. Often a group of parents request that they progress together onto the same P&C group at York Steiner School.

Recent developments

A recent addition to the Gentle Beginnings parent and infant groups in York is a closed Facebook group for those who have attended. I regularly post articles, and parents can too. The Facebook group is now a growing community of local families (over 50 at present) who, over time, are finding a discrete identity which embraces the parenting ideals of Steiner, Simplicity Parenting and the Pikler approach.

The Teachers Study Group at York Steiner School, where I run these sessions, has welcomed the parent and infant groups as part of the school's official educational policy. When the pedagogical meeting was approached with the proposal to more fully integrate the parent and infant work into the school, the teachers were studying the teenage years. What became clear in the study was how much the very early years determine the degree of challenge in adolescence. Several teachers were aware that sensory integration issues and retained reflexes were hampering the smooth unfolding of abilities. This was also true in the kindergartens, where there was evidence of difficulties in movement and balance in almost half the children. Even in the parent and child groups there are many cases of children not crawling, and this may be partly due to the cultural trend in the UK of sitting children up by six months.

Over 2011-12 and 2014, Pikler training has been held at York Steiner School, attended by Steiner Waldorf early years practitioners half of whom are P&C group leaders. With the growing awareness of the Pikler approach and how it is deeply compatible with the anthroposophical understanding of early child development, there is more confidence in the Steiner Waldorf movement to continue to develop new ways of supporting parents and young children.



Dorothy Marlen is an early years trainer and group leader, supporting families, P&C group leaders and carers in Steiner as well as mainstream day care settings, and specialising in birth to three. She is developing a new Level 3 qualification integrating Steiner and Pikler approach.

See www.emerson.org.uk/holistic-baby-and-child-care and also has plans for a new parent and infant group training based on the Pikler approach.