

Babies Deserve Respect -

Dr. Emmi Pikler's Philosophy

By Ruth Mason, Parent Center Director

Six-month-old Jeremy is lying on the living room rug, looking intently at a board book, when his Uncle Luis breezes in through the front door. "Hiya, fella!" he says, lifting his nephew high in the air. Jeremy frowns in protest.

Putting the baby down, Luis turns to Jeremy's mom, Lucia Chan. "What's wrong? Did he get up on the wrong side of the crib?"

"No, I think you just interrupted him," says Lucia.

"Huh?" This from Luis.

Both adults look down at Jeremy, who has gone back to his book and seems utterly content.

Jeremy is one of thousands of babies whose parents have been exposed to what some consider a revolutionary idea: Babies are competent individuals who have their own agendas and should be treated with respect.

In their weekly infant-parent class at Resources for Infant Educators (RIE,) in Los Angeles, Lucia and her husband, Dennis, are learning about Jeremy's agenda by carefully observing him explore, play, and express his needs. They've come to appreciate an approach that might never have crossed Uncle Luis's mind: Before you swoop in with your own plan - even if it's just a hug or a diaper change - watch what your baby is doing. Although he may just be playing with his hands or gazing at a shadow on the wall, what he is doing is important for his development.

Given the chance, babies will spend their time learning just what they need to be learning at any given stage, believes child therapist Magda Gerber, the founder and director of RIE. Gerber was a student of Emmi Pikler, M.D., the distinguished, award-winning pediatrician who ran a group home in Budapest for infants whose parents could not take care of them. Upon her death several years ago, it was renamed the Pikler Institute.

GET TO KNOW YOUR BABY

The essence of Dr. Pikler's philosophy can be summed up in one word: Respect. Based on several decades of observations and studies, she came to the conclusion that infants are born competent and that their competence should be recognized and respected.

That means first and foremost that parents should observe their babies to learn from them what they know, what they like, who they are. Respect means that before scooping up your four-month-old for a diaper change, watch to see what she is doing -- even if she is "just" watching a shadow moving on the wall or a particle of dust in a sunbeam -- and try not to interrupt.

Respect means telling your baby when you are about to do something and trying to involve her in the decision as well as in her care.

When she is involved in something, look for an opening and say something like, "I'd like to pick you up and change your diaper now," and then reach out your arms and await her response. If she reaches her arms up to you or just shifts her attention to you from what she's doing, pick her up and continue the routine, all the while narrating what you are doing and asking for her help: "I'm going to take off your pants now. Can you pull out your foot?"

If she ignores your outstretched arms and goes back to her toy or book or whatever she was involved in, try to wait a few more minutes.

If you're in a hurry, tell her you need to pick her up now and do so.

You can start this with the youngest infants. They may not yet understand your words, but they will soon come to associate your tone with your gestures.

Respect also means realizing that your baby has all the tools to learn what she needs to learn right inside her. It means allowing lots of time and room for safe, free exploration on the floor.

LET YOUR BABY EXPLORE FREELY

Pikler believed that allowing a child to explore and move is of crucial importance for her gross and fine motor development as well as for the development of creativity and problem-solving skills. In carefully watching babies move, she saw that they changed their position on the average of once a minute and that they naturally made all the motions that occupational and physical therapists use with infants who need physical therapy.

In sum, Pikler believed that parents should observe more, do less, not invest in so many toys and gadgets, let babies explore freely without interruption, let the child initiate contact with parents rather than parents following the urge to entertain her, and let the various stages of gross-motor development happen on their own without urging, propping, walking, etc.

She also spoke out against infant seats, walkers, swings or other contraptions, because a confined baby is one who cannot move freely and develop into the graceful, secure walker that it is her birthright to be.

Pikler was widely known in Hungary and in many other European countries, but is little known in the US. Her book *Peaceful Babies Contented Mothers* was translated into German and only partially translated into English in the Sensory Awareness Foundation's winter 1994 bulletin.

After many years of hands-on work with parents and babies, the Gerber and Pikler approach is now receiving national recognition. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) for example, recently incorporated the RIE approach into its recommendations for infant care.

NO NEED FOR ARTIFICIAL STIMULATION

And people in high places have changed their thinking on infant stimulation. "For years, people in our field have advocated the importance of providing stimulation for infants, while Gerber was in favor of giving babies more space," says Peter Mangione, Ph.D, co-creator of the Program for Infant-Toddler Caregivers, a project of West-Ed, a nonprofit educational research organization in Sausalito, California. "Over time, other researchers have revealed how self-motivated babies are."

Studies have found, for example, that infants like to look at black and white shapes. But since your baby's attention naturally gravitates towards contrasting patterns around her, there's no need to show her a black-and-white toy. And instead of putting a rattle into your baby's hands, Gerber suggests placing it and a few other toys within reach and letting your baby choose which she wants to play with.

Pikler and Gerber advocate a whole new way of seeing our babies. When we see them for who they truly are, respect will come naturally. For more information about Pikler's ideas, contact RIE, 1550 Murray Circle, Los Angeles, CA 90026, tel. (001-213 663-5330; www.rie.org) It publishes a manual and a newsletter, and offers videotapes and training for parents and professionals.

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