

What are the Pikler Principles for Infant Development?

By Amslee Institute

Dr. Emmi Pikler was a respected pediatrician who also managed the Loczy orphanage (1946-1979) in Hungary with Marika Reinitz. Dedicated to child development observation, Pikler identified specific principles she believed allow babies to develop in the way nature intends*.

In a time when the wealthy kept their children indoors and under the careful watch of a governess, Pikler noticed that lower class families who let their children play outside had children with fewer injuries. Well-to-do families spent time manually exercising their babies' limbs to encourage physical development. Pikler found children who had more freedom to roam, run and play were more alert and physically capable. With these types of observations, Pikler felt some established practices could limit or prevent natural child development.

The Pikler approach is based on a kind and respectful relationship between an adult and infant through tender care moments. Care moments are the activities between adults and the infant that include feeding, diapering, bath time and bedtime and that create a secure attachment. The Pikler principles* focus on having the freedom of movement, showing respect, and the belief that babies don't need 'help' to reach developmental milestones. Here's how parents and caregivers can implement Pikler's ideology**:

- Give the baby your full attention, especially when involved in caring activities. This principle focuses on completing one thing and not multi-tasking. Changing a diaper should not be rushed as it is a very vulnerable time for the child and involves touching in intimate parts.
- Slow Down, be calm and gentle. This principle is challenging in today's face-paced culture but slowing down benefits babies who may experience a sense of turmoil when jumping frequently and quickly between activities and environments.
- Build trust and your relationship during the caring activity times. This principle teaches parents and caregivers the importance of viewing tasks such as diaper changing, feeding, bath time, and dressing as one-on-one quality time together. By providing security and freedom, babies can focus their time and effort learning about their environment and how to respond to others.

- Work “with” babies and not “to” them. Pikler saw babies as active participants rather than passive recipients of childcare. Thus, babies should be treated respectfully and allowed to work together on tasks. For example, a child has a runny nose. Instead of holding the child’s head and wiping, the Pikler approach is to say, “Jackson, you have a runny nose, we’ll wipe it together.” Jackson is given time to see the tissue and place his nose into the tissue to help wipe.
- Babies are never put into a position which they cannot get into by themselves. This principle emphasizes the freedom of movement which Pikler explains, “Whilst learning to turn on the belly, to roll, crawl, sit, stand and walk, (the baby) is not only learning those movements but also how to learn. He learns to do something on his own, to be interested, to try out, to experiment.” When her daughter was born, Pikler did not interfere with her motor development in anyway. She did not do tummy time, use a walker, or prop her daughter up. Pikler found that her daughter achieved the progression of positions on her own without ‘help’. While car seats are viewed as safety equipment, use of strollers, high-chairs, swings, support seats and babywearing are discouraged.
- Allow babies uninterrupted time for play. This principle focuses on the parent and caregiver’s responsibility to provide a nurturing environment with freedom to explore. Pikler viewed babies as quite capable of entertaining themselves without the need for help and support. The early beginning of self-esteem and confidence are built as babies experience independence.
- Babies send us cues all the time and we must tune in respectfully. It’s important that caregivers pay attend and respond when babies turn their head away at another mouthful of veggies. Instead of offering more food, the baby’s choice should be respected. Infants can understand when caregivers make requests and they can respond as well as initiate communication. It’s important that caregivers pay attention to the baby and learn their interests.

Pikler passed away at the age of 82 in 1984 but her work continues to inspire infant programs across the world. Magda Gerber, a friend and protégé of Pikler, is becoming known for RIE, the Resources for Infant Educators[®]. Dr. Pikler’s daughter, Dr. Anna Tardos is the President of the Association Pikler-Loczy Hungary and continues to promote her mother’s vision of a healthy baby as “an active, competent and peaceful infant who lives in peace with himself and his environment”.



AmsleeInstitute.com
Info@AmsleeInstitute.com

   
@AmsleeInstitute
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*For more information, visit the Pikler Collection at <https://thepiklercollection.weebly.com/pikler-principles.html>

**The Pikler Approach by Dorothy Marlen, Teach Early Years at <https://www.teachearlyyears.com/under-2s/view/the-pikler-approach-part-1> and <http://www.greensproutslc.com/infant-and-toddler-care-windham-nh/pikler-approach/>



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