

Giving Babies the Best Start in Life

By Ruth Mason

Eighteen month-old Balasz is having a bath. He is reclining on his back, bouncing his long, thin body up and down, splashing water everywhere. His caretaker, Tunde, who is supporting his head with her left arm, is leaning away from the bath (which is at waist height) her body concave, the front of her tee shirt and cotton pants soaking wet. The bathroom floor is flooded. But Tunde pays no attention to all of that. Her gaze, her smile, her focus is solely on Balasz, enveloping him in affection. She talks to him in a relaxed manner, joining him as it were in this activity as he keeps splashing away, his buttocks moving rhythmically up and down. This goes on for long minutes.

When she takes him gently out of the bath, Tunde tells Balasz what she is doing, even though he is hard of hearing. Born prematurely at only half a kilo, Balasz is also mentally retarded and blind. Tunde wraps him in a soft, white towel and places him gently on the changing table adjacent to the bathtub. Before she begins drying him, Tunde leans in close and talks to Balasz, her voice soothing, gentle. He coos back, his non-seeing eyes fixed solidly on her face, enraptured. After she dries him, Tunde lays a t-shirt on Balasz chest and pats it, saying, "I'm putting on your tricot." Putting her hand through a sleeve, she asks for his arm, giving it a little tap and waits until he lifts it. She lets him feel the diaper before she puts it on him as she explains what she is doing. Every so often, Tunde leans in close and talks to Balasz softly, sometimes caressing his head as she speaks. They are intent on one another, clearly enjoying the contact. The flow of love, communication, connection and respect from Tunde to Balasz swells the heart.

It has taken Tunde a long time to bathe and dress Balasz.

When she is done, she slowly lifts him and cuddles him face to face. He reaches out and touches her mouth.

Tunde and Balasz are part of a 60-year-old research-based effort to give children the best possible start in life. Tunde and the other caretakers at the Emmi Pikler Institute in Budapest have been trained in the approach of path breaking Hungarian pediatrician and researcher Emmi Pikler, who started the children's home at the request of the Hungarian government after World War II. Since then, Loczy, as the institute is known because of its address on Loczy Street in Budapest, has become both a nurturing home to orphans, abandoned babies and children whose parents cannot care for them and a center for research and training with students and observers coming from throughout the world.

"Pikler babies" are recognized in Budapest even when they are older by the grace and confidence with which they move. The roots of this grace and harmony lie in Pikler's notion of what a baby needs for optimal development: lots of space and time for free, uninterrupted play, supported by sensitive, observant, attention during slowed down daily care routines. The approach is based on respect for babies as human beings and not objects and trust in them to develop as they are meant to without our interference or "help."

One of the benefits of the 50's for those of us who are mothers is that, with our children older or grown, we are finally free to pursue interests or long deferred dreams that take us far from home. Last month, I had the privilege of visiting Loczy for three days of observation in the baby room, the toddler room, the garden, the special playhouse

in the yard that children play in individually once a week in the presence of an attentive adult, and in the parent-infant groups the institute staff runs in the community. I was moved, sometimes to tears, by the amazing dedication, sensitivity and attentiveness of the nurses, as the caretakers are called at Loczy. Although institutions are considered to be a bad place to start one's life, the babies at Loczy are given a rare gift: plenty of time to move freely on the floor, exploring their rich environment, and focused one-on-one attention during the care giving routines of feeding, bathing, dressing and diapering. They are treated with respect: They are told what will happen ("I'm going to take you to the bath now."), what is happening ("I'm cleaning your ear."), are asked for their cooperation and participation in all care giving routines ("I'd like to put your pants on. Please lift your foot."), and are held and moved with loving hands.

I first encountered Emmi Pikler's approach by chance when my eldest, now 22, was four months old. We were at a friend's Chanukah party back home in Los Angeles, and my friend's mother, who was holding Ilana, came to give her back to me. She turned to Ilana and said, "I'm giving you back to your Mummy now," then looked at her daughter Hari, who was standing nearby and asked, "Did I do that right?"

What was going on here? Hari explained that she was being trained in an approach to baby care and then took me to visit her "class." In a large, quiet room in an old house in Los Angeles, I saw a group of mothers sitting quietly on cushions around the room, their backs against the walls, watching their babies play with empty plastic water bottles in the middle of the room. It didn't seem like much was happening but I was intrigued by the quiet and by the mindful observation. Later, in soft voices, the mothers discussed what they observed with Magda Gerber, a diminutive white-haired child therapist who had been a student of Emmi Pikler's and who had founded Resources for Infant Educators (RIE) to bring her mentor's approach to the US. Today, my friend Hari teaches nine parent-infant classes a week and other RIE-trained teachers lead classes throughout Los Angeles and in other US cities. RIE has become a trend in L.A., with movie stars like Jamie Lee Curtis attending classes with their babies.

During my stay in Budapest, I attended an international conference on Emmi Pikler's work that drew more than 300 academics, psychologists, and child care workers who are applying Dr. Pikler's ideas in Chile, New Zealand, Finland, Germany, France, the US, Canada, Greece and many other countries. One woman, who leads Pikler play groups in Germany, told me she learned about the method after seeing two remarkably graceful children on the beach in France. She was also impressed by the quality of the children's interactions with their parents. When she approached the parents to ask if they were doing anything special, they told her about Dr. Pikler's approach. Another parent educator, who has brought the approach to New Zealand, said she became interested when she saw a film in which Magda Gerber was asked if she would like to hold a baby and she replied, "Do you think the baby would like to be held by me?"

Given our hurried lifestyle and the pressure many parents feel to do what's right for their babies, Dr. Pikler's advice to "do less" and let the baby's development unfold naturally, comes as a welcome relief. Slowing down, paying attention and giving babies -- be they our children, grandchildren or others in our care -- lots of time for uninterrupted play not only gives infants a good start in life, it takes the pressure off harried parents and care givers to constantly be "doing." Letting babies be allows us to take a breath and step away from our busy culture of doing and just let ourselves be as well.