

# THE PIKLER APPROACH TO EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT: FOLLOWING THE UNFOLDING CHILD



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**AREA LEAD FOR THE EXPERTS  
AND MENTORS SCHEME AND  
REACHOUT SPH CHILDMINDER  
PARTNER.**

There are so many child development theorists, they come in and out of favour as our understanding of cognitive, physical and emotional development advances. However, some seem to strike just the right note with current thinking on the early years.

One of these is Emmi Pikler and I would like to share with you my experience of supporting a child's development using her particular approach. But first a little background, who was Emmi Pikler?



Born in 1902, Pikler was an Austrian Paediatrician. She was a contemporary of Bowlby and like him came to believe that a child's earliest experiences had lifelong consequences. To simplify Pikler's approach we can divide it into two categories, physical and emotional development, although as we are aware, in young children all development is holistic and there is some cross over.

In her practice Pikler noticed that children who had a more unhurried upbringing with less adult interference tended to be more physically and emotionally confident than their more closeted counterparts.

She theorised that left to "unfold naturally" a baby will develop following a genetically programmed set of stages, working through those stages in their own time.

While those whose progression was forced with the use of walkers or baby holding devices missed crucial developmental stages in the race to be ahead of other babies in the eyes of their well-meaning parents.

Pikler also stressed the importance of respectful care, of treating the child as we, the adult would wish to be treated, spoken to gently, provided with a warm comfortable environment that offered security and the opportunity to move and explore. When a child feels valued, they feel confident and have a sense of agency and autonomy over their lives, which sets the foundation for life long robust mental health (Early Years Coalition, 2021).

In this blog I invite you to follow the development of a Pikler baby. I have to admit, the baby in question, Evie, is one of my grandchildren and her mother lectures in Early Years Education and was also interested in Pikler. Thanks to her interest I was able to follow Evie's development using the Pikler approach from birth until she began to walk at fourteen months.

## TEN WEEKS OLD

Evie loves lying on a warm blanket, watching the world go by and interacting with familiar people, the bonding process is well underway. You will notice that there are no toys or mobiles dangling overhead. Pikler tells us that to babies the whole world is new, they don't need extra stimulation because their immediate environment is stimulating enough.



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Just a few weeks more and Evie is already developing neck control in her own time by looking from side to side, noticing the light coming through the window or the cat walking by. She is kicking her legs and waving her arms.

In Pikler's approach the babies first toys are their hands and feet, they are fascinated by them and without other distraction spend long periods investigating them. But after this we start to introduce just a few other resources, simple objects that the baby can look at or grab.



I love this picture, in her own time Evie began to move, just shuffling her body off the rug and on to floor. In this photo she began to understand that she had agency, she realised that her feet kicking the box made a noise, she was fully engaged in this activity.

Freedom to move in this way supports Evie's proprioception sense (Grenier and Vollan's 2023) which tells her where her body is in the space and will later support fine motor skills and her ability to judge the force and movement needed to carry out physical tasks.



From rolling Evie started to sit up, she didn't need to be propped up or held, because she had developed the strong core muscles to support herself. Naturally once sitting she began reaching out for objects, working on her fine motor skills and after a few weeks moving into a crawling position.

Of course, her innate drive to stand and walk meant that by twelve months Evie was pulling herself up and taking her first steps. Strong muscles mean good balance which in turn supports Evie's vestibular sense, when her eyes, neck and head muscles work together to stabilise her, incredibly this also supports hearing and language processing (Grenier and Vollans, 2023).



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Some of you reading this may think, so what? She's a baby who did what babies do. That's completely true but let's remember, she did all of this without any adult interference, without the use of holding devices, bouncers, walkers, bumby seats, it wasn't necessary because her body, just like all babies, is programmed to develop naturally. Of course she was held, cuddled, sung to read to and fed but lots of her time when she was warm comfortable and ready to explore was spent on the floor on a rug or blanket. Pikler would argue and I would agree that there is no benefit to babies being made to move before they are ready in fact it can have negative effects. Too much time spent in car seats, bouncers etc can be detrimental to a baby's physical development (Grenier and Vollans, 2023). While free body movement supports not only muscle control but hand eye coordination and communication skills (DfE, 2024)



But what about tummy time I hear you ask? When we talk about tummy time we are really talking about core and neck muscle development. As you can see from the photos, babies laying comfortably on a blanket will move their heads, wriggle their legs, wave their arms and begin to roll, these are all vital stages in core muscle development and do just the same thing as tummy time but in a more natural way. As an experienced childminder I really didn't feel comfortable with putting young babies on their tummies. Pikler's advice is that we should never put a child into a position that they couldn't get into themselves, and I empathised with the poor baby struggling to lift its head and repeatedly banging its face on the floor. It could be argued that allowing babies to develop naturally with plenty of space to move and understand their bodies negates the need for tummy time (Regarding baby, 2011).

I know this blog will have mixed responses, some of you will have always cared for babies in a certain way and won't see the necessity of changing. I was like that, I used, seats and mobile and musical stimulating toys but it really isn't necessary or particularly valuable to their development.

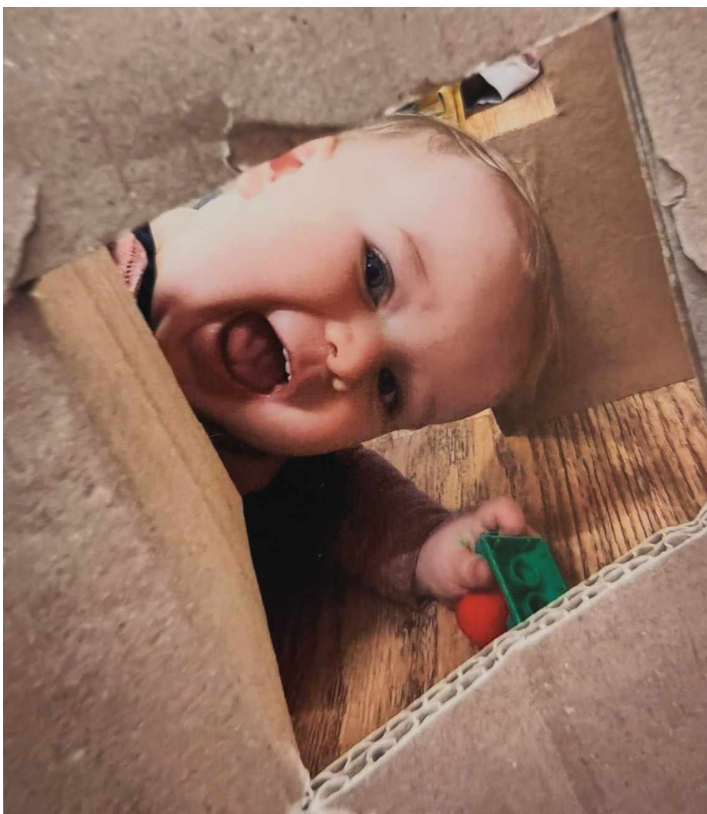
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In recent years we have seen an uptake in the move towards slow pedagogy, in taking your time, being child lead, not rushing and making the most of those magical early years. We could argue that this is easier to do with preschoolers, they can happily play in mud or paint all day, but we can also extend this approach to the babies in our care.

I understand that the Pikler approach may not work for everyone but even if you don't feel able to adopt the whole approach, maybe I can ask you to just introduce a little bit of Pikler into your setting? Maybe give babies just a bit more floor time, maybe try to talk to them and explain what you are going to do when performing intimate care, maybe try putting the brightly coloured musical toys away for a while and slowing things down. Remember, a calm, slow, gentle environment with a warm responsive practitioner is all babies need. Nature will do the rest.

Evie is now a strong confident feisty funny two-year-old, happy to explore and still happy to come back for a cuddle from time to time.



## WANT TO DELVE DEEPER?

Magda Gerber was influenced by Pikler and taught the ideas formed by Pikler to parents and students.  
<https://magdagerber.org/> "When you hold an infant, hold him not just with your body, but with your mind and heart."

John Bowlby, a psychoanalyst and contemporary of Pikler, theorised that a secure attachment in early childhood was critical to a child's mental and emotional development.  
<https://www.simplypsychology.org/bowlby.html> "A securely attached child will store an internal working model of a responsive, loving, reliable care-giver, and of a self that is worthy of love and attention"

Emmi Pikler, The Pikler institute  
<https://pikler.co.uk/about>

Dorothy Marlen, Early Childhood consultant and trainer with a focus on the work of Pikler.  
<https://www.dorothymarlen.net/> "Babies are competent and curious"

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