

Connections with the Pikler Institute

Susan Weber and Vanessa Kohlhaas

This report is by two attendees of the November 2006 Pikler Institute Course on Socialization and Conflict in Budapest.

Susan Weber: For those of us working with parents and very young children, or working with children alone in the first three years, an aspect of social development that will come to each of us sooner or later is that of aggression and conflict. Observing the child make her way from walking to joining her social community in play as a three-year-old, we cannot help but recognize that conflict is part of this journey. As a playgroup leader and teacher of teachers for many years, I have tucked away so many moments of the experience of conflict – child to child, child with parent, and child with teacher. I have pondered, studied, and practiced facilitation of groups of little ones who are tenderly reaching out into their worlds in anticipation of strengthening their nascent selves and of building connections with others.

Out of these questions, observations, and reflections it was with tremendous anticipation that I traveled to Budapest for two weeks to study once again at the Pikler Institute, as our primary course theme was that of aggression and conflict. We immersed ourselves in this theme for many days, listening to the wise experience and research of Anna Tardos, Emmi Pikler's daughter and the current director of the Institute. Eva Kallo, one of the master researchers and instructors at Lóczy (the informal name of the Institute, after the street upon which it is located) often joined us as a lecturer. Eva wove together her wide-ranging scholarship with her years as pedagogical leader of groups of children at Lóczy.

In addition to Anna and Eva's lectures, we studied video material from the Institute's archive of past decades, viewing special material that illustrated many diverse possibilities for supporting the children in situations of conflict. Ute Strub, who in her childhood attended the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart, Germany, led us in experiential activities that brought many an "aha." Course participants also brought video and written observations from

their own work. Each example led us to new questions, new strategies, and new insights.

The four American Waldorf teachers in our group pondered the ways in which our studies illustrated the journey of the incarnating child in the first three years, as we understand it through our studies in Anthroposophy. For each of us, the course brought affirmation as well as new possibilities, and we were eager to return home to continue our personal research into these themes. How much conflict is comfortable in a group? How can our engagement in these moments be most sensitive? How can we find more comfort within ourselves with this necessary element in human development? With these and other questions, we returned home filled with gratitude for the wisdom and devoted work of our Hungarian colleagues.

Anna Tardos truly works in the realm of the angels, where the teacher (or caregiver) touches the child in his deepest individuality, working out of her highest self. Those who have been a part of the Institute's work over these many decades have learned so very much about the young child out of their sensitive experience and their respect for the dignity of the child, and they are truly our partners in developing understandings that meet the needs of today's children.

The Pikler Institute will celebrate its 60th anniversary in Budapest with an International Symposium this April. I am honored to be invited to share the work of Waldorf early childhood education in the English-speaking world in a workshop, and look forward to building bridges of collegiality with others who carry a deep, abiding devotion to the very young child.

Susan Weber has been involved with Waldorf early childhood education for over twenty years, as an early childhood teacher at Monadnock Waldorf School in Keene, NH; as coordinator of the Waldorf early childhood teacher training at Antioch New England; and as one of the founding circle of Sophia's Hearth Family Center in Keene. She has been invited to present the work of Sophia's Hearth Family Center at the Pikler Institute's 60th anniversary symposium in Budapest in April 2007.

Vanessa Kohlhaas: The theme of conflict was extremely relevant to my work as a nursery and parent-child class teacher. The experience and information I received greatly influenced how I support the children and parents in my classes. I would like to share a few of my notes from the conference.

It is a common misunderstanding of the Pikler work that children should develop naturally – meaning, that they do not need adults. However children do need adults, not just for basic needs (caregiving), but also because children learn through adults’ modeling of appropriate behavior.

Our lives and environments are full of expectations and rules. Children experience rules in daycare, the playgroup, and the family. Anna Tardos gave the example that she counted over 20 rules children must follow when eating bread and butter. If there are that many with one task, then obviously the child must learn hundreds or thousands of rules.

Socialization is the process of internalizing social norms or standards learned or adopted by the environment. The “norms” become a part of a well-socialized individual’s internal characteristics. A well-socialized person does not follow rules because he is afraid of punishment, but because it is a part of him. This process begins at birth.

A child enters the world not knowing all the social expectations around her. She begins her experience doing only what she wants. As she gets older, the adults around her begin to tell her (through words or actions) that an action is not allowed. This creates tension in the child and may become a source of conflict for her. Over time the child begins to understand the meaning of the rule or expectation and is physically able to follow it, but still she does only what she wants. The parent or caregiver may respond to her in a variety of ways: understanding, frustration, consistent boundaries, permissiveness, etc.

The child needs to learn how to assert her own will. It is sometimes pleasant and sometimes not pleasant when a child is developing her will. The development of a strong will has an impact on the ability to obey rules. How much freedom we give to the child to express her will is also important. The child should learn and adapt to social rules while standing up for her own desires. The child must learn to do this in relationships with adults and

other children.

The child continues her development on the road to socialization by following the understood rule when the caregiver is present. However, when the caregiver steps out of the room, even if another adult is present, the child will revert to her own desired behavior. This stage is followed by the child following the rule even when the caregiver is not present. In due course, the child integrates the rule into her own will. This allows the previous feeling of tension to be released. The child now experiences the rule as a part of her own inner standards and may even tell others the rule (for example, younger siblings).

The process of socialization does not end, and therefore we all experience the tension and conflict that comes with being a part of a community. Conflict is especially difficult for caregivers of young children. Conflicts are complicated pedagogically because they take place suddenly and the adult doesn’t have time to prepare for a response. We can plan, but not in the same way as caregiving. In addition, our childhood, past relationships, and inner work affect our work with children. Conflict situations are the moments when an adult is sometimes carried away by her own emotions. We must first deal with the conflict situation as it occurs and then reflect on how we can prevent it from happening again.

No magic spells or answers were handed out at the course on conflict at the Pikler Institute. There are no rote answers on how to handle a conflict situation with young children. We did, however, receive countless examples, guiding wisdom, research, and experiences to inform our work with young children. The following can serve as guidelines, but caregivers must use their own knowledge, observations, and meditations to lead them to what will work in their individual situations.

Our speech should always distinguish between the person and the action. We should not judge the child. The child isn’t bad. Only the action needs to change. During a conflict, our words and/or actions should convey to the child, “I notice you. You are important to me.”

When a conflict situation is occurring between young children it is often helpful to first observe what is happening. Is it a real conflict? Can it be

solved by the children independently? We don't have to interfere immediately. Watch the children to see if they can solve the conflict on their own.

If the conflict continues, increase your proximity, if possible. This can be done as simply as glancing over at the children to let them know that you are aware of their situation. You could also come closer to the children with an open, nonjudgmental gesture.

If the children are not able to solve the conflict on their own, give advice before you interfere with the situation. You should speak to all the children involved without singling out a "bully" or "victim." If the caregiver speaks only to the hurt child, then the child learns: "If I am hurt and cry, someone will come and care for me." If the caregiver speaks only to the child who hit then the child learns: "If I hit, then someone will come and give me attention."

Real aggressive behavior has to be directly and immediately stopped. The adult must not only deal with the immediate situation, while accepting the child, but also find the underlying cause of the

problem behavior.

Once the initial conflict has passed, it is important for the caregiver to review the situation. What happened before, during, and after the conflict? Can I prevent this from happening again? Consider such things as the rhythm of the day, environment, health, sleep, and food/allergies. Our work with Anthroposophy also allows for greater support through our meditations and relationship with the child's angel.

Socialization and conflict have an impact on all of us who work with young children. I hope that our continued relationship with the Pikler Institute will help to enliven our own work and research within the Waldorf movement. For more information on the Pikler Institute, please visit www.pikler.org or contact me by email: butterflygarden@gmail.com.

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