

Casa Emmi Pikler

A Children's Garden in the Andes Mountains of Ecuador

Joyce Gallardo

When I arrived at the big wrought-iron gates of Casa Emmi Pikler one sunny morning in July, parents were arriving with their children. The petals of rose-colored bougainvilleas climbing in a welcoming arch over the porch of the house fluttered like butterflies in the soft morning breeze. There was a flurry of greetings – *buenos dias!* – to teachers and hugs and *hasta luego!* to mama and papa, as the patio came alive with the shouts and laughter of the children going off to the various play spaces with their caregivers.

A flower-decked path cut into a carpet of green grass to the right of the house led to the gate of a delightful, magical garden, a peaceful haven for children, protected by a high brick wall along which grew tall eucalyptus trees. Trees laden with fruits shaded the play areas and the many fragrant flower beds provided palettes of color against the backdrop of a carpet of green – all offering a feast for the senses. Hundreds of white butterflies fluttered near the vegetable garden where the gardener was composting the soil from a large compost pile. In the distance the deep purple peaks of the Andes soared silently towards the blue vault of the heavens. And this was just a few blocks from the hustle and bustle of the center of town.

Katharina Becker is the co-founder of Casa Emmi Pikler. She told me that she first started a group for parents and children one and a half to two and a half years old in her home in April 2001 with three children. In February, 2002, Casa Emmi Pikler was inaugurated.

Katharina found a site that she transformed into a special garden for children, where they could spend most of their time outdoors in the year-round temperate (averaging 65 to 80 degrees) climate of the town of Tumbaco. It is large (3,000 square meters), with plenty of room to create play spaces, and it is close to the center of town. Today seventy children from four months to six years old are enrolled at Casa Emmi Pikler.

Katharina facilitates the parent-child groups and is the director of Casa Emmi Pikler, which receives its inspiration from the insights of the Hungarian

pediatrician Emmi Pikler, for whom it is named. The spaces that had been created for the different age groups of children are divided by low child-sized fences and gates made of *carrizo*, a reed-grass that grows in Ecuador. The fences and gates have the appearance of just “growing” out of the ground! In the two-and-a-half- to three-and-a-half-year-old group, several straw mats, called *esteras* are laid out on the grass with toys on them. There is a climbing ladder, several wooden boxes, a hammock seat and some large curved pieces of tree trunks for climbing. A beautiful playhouse structure constructed of wood and other natural materials, with wide spiral stairs topped by a red-tiled roof and a fenced platform, is in the middle of this area. The platform provides a large shady space underneath for the table and small stools, as well as a space for diapering.

The caregiver receives the children individually as they arrive by applying a natural bug repellent specially made by Katharina of lavender, cloves, lemon balm, lemongrass, aromatic eucalyptus and sunflower oil to their tender, exposed skin. Her touch is light and delicate and she gives each child her undivided attention as she explains what she is doing in a soft voice meant just for his ears.

Adjoining this space is the parent-child space. Mothers arrive with their one- and two-year-olds at 10 AM and Katharina is there to greet them. The mothers soon stretch out comfortably on the grass in the warm sunshine to observe their children playing with big colored beach balls, small wicker balls, large wicker baskets, and with the water in the small swimming pool. Some children climb on the wooden rungs of small climbing structures and in and out of low wooden boxes like the ones at Loczy in Budapest.

Katharina says that “the snack is an offering, not an obligation.” A food tray is brought to a small table in the shade of a tree with little stools scaled to the size of the children, and they are invited to come. They come quickly to eat the slices of fresh fruit and crackers, brought by the parents. It is a peaceful, quiet snack time. Soon it is time to go home. At the gate, warm goodbye hugs are

exchanged with Katharina. *Adios, hasta manana!*
Good-bye until tomorrow!

Respect for the autonomous motor development and independent movement of the child, as well as free play without direct interference from the adult, are among the key principles of the Pikler work. Emmi Pikler felt that the child's very individuality and experience of competence arise out of self-initiated independent movement and that the proper attitude of the adult is of paramount importance to the child's development. These are the cornerstones of the work with the children at Casa Emmi Pikler.

Casa Emmi Pikler is open from 8 AM to 1 PM five days a week. Various services are offered to children and families: workshops for pregnant mothers, home visits to families with newborns, and weekly reunions with parents on questions of child-rearing and development. They also offer national and international student internships. Outreach and dissemination of information about the Pikler work are important components of Casa Emmi Pikler.

St. Martin festivals and the Advent Garden celebrations are enthusiastically received by the children and their parents. Katharina is also striving to learn more in depth about the festivals native to Ecuador. She celebrates the summer solstice festival, called *Inti Raymi*, an important festival for the indigenous peoples in Ecuador, with the families at Casa Emmi Pikler, amidst music and dance. The children bring fruits to offer and seeds to plant in the vegetable garden.

Story time happens every day at noon for the older children. "The children come only if they want to," Esteban told me. Esteban is the only male caregiver here. His daughter attends Casa Emmi Pikler. His group is the largest one there, with seventeen kindergarten-age children. The kindergarten space is the largest by far and its only boundaries are natural ones – the pool, the brick wall, a thicket which provides a natural tunnel for play, a grove of eucalyptus trees where there are tall stumps for climbing, and a house made of *carrizo* with a curtained doorway.

Three children were sitting on a four-foot-high stump. One had a doll in her arms. Two boys were daring each other to jump off the stump onto the ground. It was the girl who jumped off first and ran to the natural tunnel to hide. Other children were

climbing and hanging by their legs from a jungle gym. They were all completely absorbed in their play and hardly noticed me observing. The grove of trees offered a welcoming shade from the sun overhead and the pungent smell of eucalyptus wafted through the air on currents of wind scurrying through the garden.

In the house at Casa Emmi Pikler, there are three small rooms with toys and Montessori materials which the children can use whenever they wish. The rooms were orderly, with cubbies and open shelves easily accessible to the children. A few children were playing in one of the rooms when I entered. There were two adults working in the kitchen preparing the snacks. The children played uninterrupted, except for snack time, until noon, when most of them went to hear the story Esteban would tell near the pool. Esteban had been sitting a little distance from the children, observing them while they played. He was there for them, but I did not see one child run over to "tattletale" on someone or to ask for assistance. The children were deeply involved in their play and I saw no conflicts arise. The only near-conflict I observed in the whole garden was in the one-and-a-half- to three-and-a-half-year-old group, where one child was pouring water from a small bowl on the heads of several other children. Their caregiver did not intervene right away and the children were complaining (one was crying). They did not like having water poured over their heads. The caregiver, who was new, did not intervene soon enough.

The parents of Casa Emmi Pikler said that they were working closely with Katharina to help promote respectful caregiving by disseminating information to local child care centers, known as *guarderías de niños* in Ecuador, where the caregivers were interested in knowing more about the insights of Emmi Pikler and how to apply them in their work with children. Katharina told us that Casa Emmi Pikler has plans to develop a training program in the near future for teachers, caregivers and parents from abroad who are interested in coming to learn more about what they do in Ecuador. There would also be an opportunity to work as an intern side-by-side with the caregivers at Casa Emmi Pikler, with Katharina as mentor.

I was pleased that Katharina accepted our invitation to the festive graduation ceremony at the

Waldorf School, Centro Educativo Micael, where new collegial relationships and friendships were forged. The kindergarten and preschool teachers, as well as a class teacher, were invited to visit Casa Emmi Pikler and Katharina would recommend Centro Educativo Micael as a possible choice of schools to her parents whose children were ready to enter first grade. This is community building, consciously creating a nurturing worldwide community to support the respect and dignity of the young child.

Casa Emmi Pikler embodies the ideals of respect and dignity for the young child within an *artistic*

context. Through her vision and her commitment to these ideals, Katharina has created an artistic model for center-based care in Ecuador where childhood is honored out of a conscious respect for the dignity of humanity worldwide.

Joyce Gallardo is a member of WECAN'S RIE (Resources for Infant Educators)/Pikler Research group and recently completed the RIE I training. If you have any questions regarding this article, you can reach Joyce at joyceagallardo@yahoo.com. For questions regarding the training program and internship at Casa Emmi Pikler, you can reach Katharina at pohlmann@uio.satnet.net.