

Emmi-Pikler-Haus

A Pikler/Waldorf Residential Home for Young Children in Germany

• Joyce Gallardo

Emmi-Pikler-Haus, a residential home for children from birth to six years old, is located in Gersdorf, a rural hamlet of Dahme-Spreewald, Germany, halfway between Dresden and Berlin. The nine children who live here range in age from five weeks to six years old. They are mostly social orphans—children whose parents cannot take care of them because of substance abuse or mental illness in the family. The children may have social-emotional or developmental disturbances, as many come from homes where violence, abuse or neglect is common. Each child's story is unique.

Here at Emmi-Pikler-Haus, the children live in a family-like life community with their caregivers, where they are sheltered and protected and given respectful, loving, and tender attention. Consistency and continuity in their daily life is so important for these children, for whom life before coming to Emmi-Pikler-Haus was a series of disconnected, fragmented, and often painful events.

Here life is rhythmical and predictable—bedtime and naps are at the same time each day; nourishing, wholesome meals are served at the same hour each day; there is time for indoor and outdoor play and time for rest. The regular, focused, and respectful caregiving times provide opportunities for intimacy and the cultivation of a special I-Thou relationship between the child and his caregiver; as the child's trust in the adults who care for him is slowly restored, a healing process can begin.

A Brief History of Emmi-Pikler-Haus

Ute Strub and her colleague, Elke-Maria Rischke,

who were the main caregivers in the beginning at Emmi-Pikler-Haus, formed a seven-member association in 2004 to create this residential home for young children out of the fusion of the pedagogies of Hungarian pediatrician Emmi Pikler, founder of Loczy, a residential nursery in Budapest, Hungary (also known as the Pikler Institute), and of Austrian philosopher and scientist Rudolf Steiner, founder of the Waldorf School in Germany. It would be the first Pikler/Waldorf residential home for young children in the world. In March 2006, they were able to rent the former home of relatives of German poet Heinrich von Kleist, in the tiny hamlet of Gersdorf, and with several generous donations began to remodel the old kitchen and to lazure the walls in soft plant colors. The floors and doors were scrubbed and polished, and cotton and silk curtains softly tinted with rose and peach-colored plant dyes were hung to diffuse the bright sunlight streaming in through the big south-facing windows that overlook a large cornfield.

Little wooden beds with peach and rose silken canopies were constructed for the children who would live here. Objects from nature were collected and baskets of pine cones, shells, stones and sticks sat on low shelves, waiting for little hands to touch and play with them. A basket of dress-up clothes and hats sat nearby.

Wooden play stands were made and little wooden playhouses were draped with plant-dyed cloths for a roof, waiting for a little child to come "live" in them. A vegetable garden was planted and a lovely outdoor space in the garden was created with a sandbox and tree trunks to climb on. A deck was built out the back door where the

children would nap under a canopy, protected from sun and wind.

In June 2006, Child Protection Services granted them permission to receive children at Emmi-Pikler-Haus, but the first child did not arrive until January 2007. By the end of May 2007 they were caring for six children and training two other caregivers with the financial support of Child Protection Services. Today, nine children live here who benefit from the respectful, loving caregiving and the creative, natural environment. Open, free, imaginative play without interference from the adults is supported and there are materials for the autonomous movement of the children in the house and garden.

Therapeutic horseback riding is offered for the older children on a nearby farm, where they are exposed to other animals as well. Throughout the year the festivals are celebrated with all the children, while each Sunday morning is marked by music, song and dance. Each evening a candle is lit at bedtime for story and a prayer, and in the morning the children are awakened by a song to the accompaniment of the gentle music of the kantele.

At Emmi-Pikler-Haus there is a recognition of the child's spiritual as well as earthly origin. They strive to work from an anthroposophical image of the child—that of the reincarnated human spirit who has experienced repeated earth lives, although for some of the caregivers the anthroposophical approach is new. Even though the Pikler approach does not articulate or work from a defined spiritual perspective, the I-Thou relationship that the caregivers at Loczy develop with the children underscores the depth of reverence and devotion with which care is provided.

The Development Diary, Child Study

The caregivers keep a development diary for each child in which they document his growth and development, similar to what is done at Loczy. There is regular medical observation by the house doctor, who is an anthroposophical pediatrician, and an individual daily chart is kept for every detail of the child's care as well. This documentation and study of each child's development is an inspiration for his caregivers,

as they can see how their care and attention have contributed to the good health and well-being of each child. Once a week all of the caregivers meet and conduct a child study, which could continue for three consecutive weeks. This is reflective of the child studies that Waldorf early childhood teachers conduct, wherein through our observations we create a picture of the whole child for colleagues and then out of this sharing often come to insights about how we might best serve that child.

Parent Visits

On Saturday mornings from nine to twelve, parents may visit their child in the presence of an adult from Emmi-Pikler-Haus and afterwards discuss the child's progress with Pia Buerfent, the administrator, who was a child in Elke-Maria's kindergarten many years ago. This communication with the parents is part of a long-term attempt to reunite the children with their families. Yet, sometimes it is decided that it would not be healthy for a child to return to his family, and another alternative must be investigated, such as foster care or adoption. If a child is to be adopted or move into foster care, his caregivers carefully accompany him over the course of his transition, in conjunction with Child Protection Services.

A Visit to Emmi-Pikler-Haus

I visited Emmi-Pikler-Haus this summer after attending a seminar at Loczy, where Ute gave several workshops. Early in the morning, my husband and I took the two-hour train ride from Dresden to the town of Golssen, and then a fifteen minute taxi ride to the hamlet of Gersdorf, where Emmi-Pikler-Haus is located. The house is set back from the dirt road that winds past it, and is surrounded on both sides by gardens and cornfields. As we walked up the driveway, we heard the flapping of wings and saw a stork fly overhead to a huge nest on a large, high post near the house, where two young storks sat, their beaks open wide, waiting to be fed by the mother stork. How appropriate! I thought. In Europe, the stork is still a symbol of childbirth and is said to make its nest near where a child will be born. It is considered a blessing for a stork to build its nest near one's house or on one's chimney.

In the garden next to the house, the older

children were playing and ran to the little gate as soon as they saw us. They called out and we waved a greeting. Their caregiver smiled and bent down to speak to them softly in German and they ran back to their play in the sandbox.

Ute greeted us from the front door at the top of the steps. When we stepped through that big wooden door, the soft, diffuse light and quiet, peaceful atmosphere inside were a sharp contrast to the bright summer sunlight and the sound of a tractor harvesting corn on a nearby farm. The lovely, soft hues of the walls, the curtains that billowed pastel plant colors from open windows framed in natural wood, the wood floors that shone with just a hint of a shine, the aroma of delicious, wholesome food cooking in the spotless, welcoming kitchen, and the presence of the adults working were all like a gentle caress to the senses.

Little play houses were tucked away in corners of the play room and knotted dolls were sleeping in their basket beds. The children's beds were attractively arranged in a large airy room, all with silken canopies of a whisper of rose color. What a lovely place for children to live! I thought.

The Children of Emmi-Pikler-Haus

We went outside onto the deck just as the older children were coming up the stairs to wash their hands before lunch. One little girl tugged at her caregiver's skirt and whispered something to her. "She would like you to sing a children's song," the caregiver said. "Yes," I said, smiling, and with gestures, sang a song:

*There's a sun for the morning
And a moon for the night
When the moon hides her face
Still the stars twinkle bright*

*Love and joy, light and beauty
Come from God high above
And He gives these good gifts
From a heart full of love.*

The little girl smiled shyly and tugged at her caregiver's skirt once more. She whispered in her ear, "Again." Once again, I sang the song, and the children smiled sweetly. The little girl asked for me to sing the song again and again. By the fourth

time I sang it, all of the children, their caregiver and Ute were doing the gestures with me. Then, off they went to wash their hands for lunch.

Elke-Maria invited us to walk in the garden with her, where she told us about the youngest child at Emmi-Pikler-Haus, Julie-Marie, who was just eight weeks old when she arrived. She had been held in a vertical position almost from birth, without adequate support to her head and back. When she was brought here two weeks ago, her whole body was tense and her hands were clinched in tight little fists up near her shoulders as she struggled to support her own head.

Another child came to Emmi Pikler Haus when he was four years old from a home where he had been physically abused. The first day he came to stay at Emmi-Pikler-Haus he said to his caregiver, "I want to stay here forever because I know you love me." Learning to model the behavior of the caregivers at Emmi-Pikler-Haus is a part of the long process of attempting to reunite parents with their children. By means of this modeling of the behavior of the caregivers, a new and positive relationship has developed between this child and his mother.

We went inside for lunch and Ute pointed out the baby's room. She was sleeping, but I could go in and see her for a moment. In this room, a peaceful sanctuary for the nurturing and healing of the infant's damaged life and touch senses had been created. The crib where baby Julie-Marie slept was like a "celestial incubator" in which she was enveloped in sheaths of protection. Over the crib was draped a rosebud-colored silk canopy, the same delicate color as her cheeks. Her pale white skin was almost transparent. Her little head was covered with a natural-colored silk hat and her silk cardigan and cotton bunting were also natural-colored. The bedding was of the same color, all of which gave her the appearance of a tiny angel sleeping on a cloud.

The baby's little hands were no longer clenched tightly, trying to hold up her head, but were relaxed and open on either side of her head, like the leaves of a plant. Her tiny pink lips curved ever so slightly into a sweet smile and she sighed softly in her sleep. With a last look, I slipped quietly out the door.

Lunch was waiting and with it a lovely social

time with Ute and two of the caregivers. Ute told us that when the doctor who first brought Julie-Marie to Emmi-Pikler-Haus came to visit the day before, she brought him into the room where the infant was asleep. He said, "Yes, this baby looks very well, but now I would like to see our Julie-Marie." He did not recognize the infant just two short weeks after her arrival at Emmi-Pikler-Haus.

It would soon be nap time, and the children were being tucked into their beds, but still, there was work to be done. The three o'clock train would take us back to Dresden. With gratitude we bid everyone farewell, knowing that we would meet again.

Joyce Gallardo *has been an early childhood educator for more than twenty-five years. She is the director of Los Amiguitos, a family day care home, where she works out of the insights of Waldorf early childhood education, offering a kindergarten-nursery program that is enriched by the work of Emmi Pikler. She has completed RIE Level I training in the U.S. and introductory and advanced training at the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary.*

Legacy of an Adopted Child

Author unknown

*Once there were two women who never knew each other.
One you do not remember, the other you call Mother.
Two different lives shaped to make you one,
One became your guiding star, the other became your sun.
The first one gave you life and the second taught you to live it.
The first one gave you a need for love, the second was there to give it.
One gave you a nationality, the other gave you a name.
One gave you talent, the other helped you find your aim.
One sought for you a home that she could not provide,
The other prayed for a child and her hopes were not denied.
And now you ask me through your tears
The age-old question unanswered through the years,
Heredity or environment? Which are you product of?
Neither my darling, neither, just two different kinds of love.*