

On the Move: The Development of Movement

— Vanessa Kohlhass

When a child is learning a new skill in movement—whether learning to walk or climbing a tree—parents often worry that he might fall and hurt himself. But sometimes it is our own reaction that causes a child to lose his focus and fall. When a child falls, he has lost the ground underneath him. If we quickly swoop him up, he loses his relationship to gravity a second time.

In 2001, I attended the 2nd International Professional Conference, The Dignity of the Small Child, which included a presentation of the concept of the small child according to Emmi Pikler. In the 1940s, Pikler, a Hungarian pediatrician, founded a unique orphanage, the Emmi Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary. After the conference I visited the Institute.

Pikler's work was brought to the United States by Magda Gerber, a student of Pikler's and an infant specialist, who together with Dr. Tom Forrest, a pediatric neurologist, founded Resources for Infant Educators (RIE). I took the RIE Foundations course to further my understanding of this approach to supporting infant development.



Illustration by Klara Pap from the Pikler Institute

The work of Pikler and Gerber has been a major influence on my work with children, both as a teacher and as a parent. One of the guiding principles of Pikler and RIE is that an inherent wisdom allows

children to develop movement skills, from lying on their backs to walking. We need only remove hindrances to allow this natural development to happen. We achieve this by *not* putting the child into a position she can't get into herself, *not* telling her how to move, and *not* focusing on arbitrary motor development milestones. Instead, we *can* provide space and time for movement, observe the quality of the child's movement, and recognize and celebrate transitional postures.

"Be careful what you are teaching the infants, it may interfere with what they could be learning."

~ Magda Gerber

Here are some ways we can support children through the development of movement as they progress from lying on their backs to walking.

Reflexes

The development of movement begins long before birth. Primitive reflexes emerge in utero and play a vital role in healthy development. They provide protection, support, and stimulation, allowing the child to fully explore the movements of her body. Reflexes cause the child to involuntarily respond to a stimulus and set the foundation for later stages of motor development. A reflex is usually suppressed as a new skill is developed. In this way the reflex is integrated into the higher skill. We can support this process by allowing the natural development of free movement.

Lying on the Back

The baby spends much of her time asleep as she adjusts from life in the womb to life on earth. This is the time to provide warmth and protection and to avoid unnecessary loud noises, intense smells, bright lights, and sudden movements.

We can prepare the infant for what is coming through words and action. For example, before picking the child up, we can show the child our hands and say, "I am going to pick you up now." We

can then pick the baby up in a slow and calm way. If this is done in the same way each time, we will begin to feel the baby adjust and prepare in anticipation of being picked up.

Discovering Hands

Still lying on the back, the infant begins to develop more control over her movements. Then one day she makes a great discovery: her hands. These become her greatest plaything. This is the time for the infant to begin spending more time lying on her back exploring her movements and environment.

It is very important that we not move the child into a position that she cannot get into herself. It is tempting to want to prop our child up using pillows or a contoured chair so she can see out into the world. But when a child is put into a new position that she has not yet mastered, she loses the freedom to control her own movements. Lying on her back is the position of most competency for the infant at this stage of development. It allows her readiness to evolve.

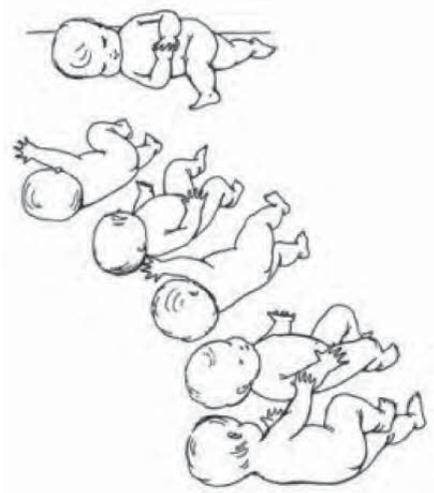


Illustration by Klara Pap for the Pikler Institute

Rolling Over

The infant progresses to slowly turning and rolling over onto his belly. This does not happen all at once, but through trial and error. He stretches and flexes his muscles this way and that. He lifts one leg and crosses it over to the other side. Then one day he turns himself all the way over. At first, his arm may

get caught underneath his body. This can be very frustrating. He will have to return to lying on his back and rest a while before trying again. When he is able to roll over, in his own time, he will have developed the skills needed to lift his head and move his limbs while lying on his stomach. He may sometimes lift his head and all four limbs at the same time, as if flying like a bird.

At this stage, it is important to give the child uninterrupted time and ample space to move. The RIE practice of “wants nothing quality time” can create a mindful moment of observation of the child. This is such a wonderful gift to both child and parent.

Crawling

Once the child can roll over and play in the prone position, she begins to develop more control over her body movements. She can easily lift and hold her head and chest off the ground. Her legs extend and develop more muscle tone. She begins to crawl with her torso on the ground, pulling herself along and using her legs like a lizard in the desert. Then she progresses to creeping on her hands and knees, and sometimes on her hands and feet, like a bear. Creeping provides important movement patterns that will have far-reaching effects on her visual and cognitive skills, as well as her continued development of movement. Infants learn eye-hand coordination skills by watching their hands as they creep across the floor. Eye-hand coordination is part of the foundation for learning to read later in life. Now the child has the ability to move across a room using a wide range of movements.



Photo taken at the Pikler Institute by Marian Reismann

The play space needs to continue to adapt as the child learns to crawl. Playing outside is a wonderful opportunity for all children, bringing with it many interesting play materials such as leaves, dirt, sticks, and rocks. It also brings grass, hills, and logs to climb over and around. Effort should be taken not to restrict movement. This is often the time that parents will consider using walkers or jumpers. Such equipment puts children in developmentally inappropriate positions and takes freedom away from their movements. It has even been suggested that the use of walkers can lead to delays in motor and mental development. Free time on the floor spent creeping, rolling, and playing while lying down allows the child to practice a wide variety of movements that help her motor skills develop naturally.

“Dr. Pikler reassured the parents that choosing to go down stairs head first is a smart choice for the young child. This way the child can see where he or she is going and use the movement of the hands, arms and elbows to stop themselves.”

~ Eileen Henry

Sitting

A child first learns to sit on his own around the same time that he learns to stand up. Lying on his stomach, he first leans on one side with his torso still on the ground. Then, using one arm, he lifts himself into a half-sitting position. Finally he sits up without using either arm as a support. With a little more practice he can sit with his legs stretched out and his arms free to explore the objects around him. A child who is given time and space to learn to sit on his own, instead of being put into a sitting position before he is ready, is often more at ease with his posture.

When the child is ready to start sitting on a stool or chair, it helps to provide furniture that allows continued ease in movement. One suggestion is to offer a low tray that the child can use as a table while sitting on the floor. Later he can graduate to a small table and chair that allow him to come and go independently. If you want to have a high chair at a family table, the type with adjustable seat and foot plates will grow with your child.

Standing and Walking

The day finally comes when the child stands by herself and takes her first step. In order to walk, she must be able to support her own weight, balance on one foot, and shift her weight from side to side. This is no easy task, but she has been practicing hard for a long time, through all the previous stages of motor development. We can support her by not distracting her, so she can concentrate on the task at hand. It is important to focus on the *quality* of each stage of development, instead of worrying about how quickly the child progresses. Babies always do what they can do and what they are ready for. ♦

“The most important thing has not been mentioned: namely that an infant’s own movements, the development of these movements, and every detail of this development are a constant source of joy to him.”

~ Emmi Pikler, MD

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Resources:

- Compassionate Sleep Solutions, compassionatesleepsolutions.com.
- “Struggle Happens” by Eileen Henry, compassionatesleepsolutions.com/struggle-happens.