

The Future is in Our Hands

Satisfying Babies' Physical and Emotional Needs through Mindful Tactile Communication

by Elsa Chahin, with the mentorship of Anna Tardos



Photo by Etienne Moine, CISA AMI, Ecuador

AUTHOR'S NOTE: For the purpose of clarity and ease of reading, when referring to a child, it will be in the masculine; the caregiver/adult will always be referred to in the feminine.

Being touched is paramount to every baby's daily life. The young child's well-being will depend, in great part, on the way he is touched by the adult. Through the use of our hands, we bathe, feed, and dress these precious souls. Our hands, therefore, represent everything to the infant, not only by the adult that cares for him, but as an expression of the entire world, thus becoming his first connection with the universe around him.

As the late modern dance pioneer Martha Graham once proclaimed, "Movement never lies," and to that I add, nor do hands. Consider this: If they are rough, impersonal, and



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rushed during moments of care, the infant will link these experiences to unpleasant sensations. Indeed, he may look forward to finishing the task by exhibiting resistance, yet the adult may fail to read any cues emanating from the baby's tense body.

Similarly, when one is in a hurry to finish a task — thinking that the quicker it gets done, for example, the better — she will handle the infant with shorter, faster, and more mechanical movements. This, too, becomes a source of discomfort for the infant, as it is apparent that the more the adult rushes, the less the child participates. In other words, the more urgently she tries getting something done, the more upset the child becomes, with these actions often times becoming a vicious circle.

Moreover, rushed movements do not lend themselves to collaboration or empathy. The child will try to get the adult's attention by sending small signals, hoping they are interpreted as an invitation to slow down. Through these small signals, the child wants to have an influence on the adult during caregiving interactions, letting his parents or caregiver know that there are ways of creating a partnership. Because an infant requires much attention throughout the day, routines can become simply that, routines, and

not personal meetings of togetherness that are repeated throughout the day.

A baby needs safety, security, and nurturing; he wants to be considered a person. When hands are loving, mindful, and attentive, even the youngest infant will nestle into the palms that envelop him. He will prepare himself to be picked up by relaxing his limbs and cooperating with the gentle movements that the adult has begun. By feeling included, he will then give freely of his disposition. In such instances, more than basic care is being provided, both fueling and fulfilling the baby's emotional needs.

Renowned Hungarian pediatrician Emmi Pikler (1902-1984) proposed that being respectful with the young stems from the simple idea of considering each child as a unique individual from the first moment of life. After decades of research as a pediatrician, first in private practice and later as director of the Pikler Institute (commonly known as Lóczy; 1946-2011,) Pikler, through her keen observations, found that emphasis needed to be placed on the child-mother or child-adult relationship. This, she believed, ensured that the adult caring for the child was not only attentive to his inner needs, but that a peaceful, healthy, and intimate bond could be forged.

It was also proven at Lóczy that routine-like handling of children could be prevented with the adult's self-awareness and mindful observation in relationship to the child under her care. "How does the child feel in my hands? Is he reacting positively, or do I need to slow down even more?" By changing her attitude toward the child and eliminating unkind, oppressing movements, the caregiver's hands are no longer uncomfortable, but gentle and reverent.

Communicating Love and Presence to Infants

When engaged in caregiving interactions, we need to address the infant, talking directly to him, not over him, in a calm and measured voice.



Photo by Etienne Meine, CASA AMI, Ecuador

But it is our attentive, open hands that are initiating such a dialogue. There are questions and answers, with our gestures representing an even-tempered waiting.

“Are you ready for me? Can I pick you up now?” we ask, pausing to wait for the child’s response. His body is relaxed and the tension dissipates. And depending on this young child’s developmental stage, we may even wait for him to give us his arms.

Empathy is the natural and desired byproduct, as adult and child become open and receptive to one another. The infant is learning to cooperate, and it is important for us to see his competence. At the same time, the adult is being responsive to the baby’s cues, and adapting her movements and rhythm to his. This togetherness helps the child to accept the world as a trusting place, where a connection emerges, making the process enjoyable. This process, however, requires patience and should never be hurried.

By following this process, we are showing both sensitivity and presence. Through our articulated movements and gentle tone of voice, we are offering babies an invitation to participate and, in effect, be the co-creators of their care. Slowing down may take a few more minutes than hurried care, but the outcome is a trusting baby who is discovering pleasure in the relationship.

Fostering Feelings of Security in Infants

By being fully present during the intimate moments of care. The adult’s attention is fully given to the child she is caring for. The message needs to be, “I am here for you, nothing else matters in this moment but you. I see you, I hear you, I am here.” Because of this, the hands are completely



Photo by David Vigliotti, Little Learners Lodge, South Carolina

aware of and alert to the effects of their actions. And it is this magical process that gives way to a dance, where leader and follower are lost in the musical ebb and flow, and both participants are equally interacting.

By offering our gentle and secure hands. During caregiving interactions, the infant mustn’t feel imprisoned by a tight hold, or unstable because our wobbly arms are not supporting him fully. Each time we hold a young infant in our arms, it is important that his whole trunk and head are supported — that when we pick him up and lay him back down, it is not done abruptly. This will prevent him from losing the feeling of physical safety. During a feeding, for example, he should have the freedom to reach for the adult’s hand, or the bottle or a spoon, thus actively participating in what is happening. During diapering, he should be allowed to change positions, with us following accordingly. If a child is already walking, his independence would not be supported if he were taken firmly by the wrist and pulled, nor if he were being pushed by the head or shoulders. This is not only disrespectful, but it also contributes to a loss of balance, and possibly, a hard landing. We need to send the message that he is valued as a person by turning the moments into pleasant experiences of cooperation.

By embracing him as a competent participant during all care situations and not just as a passive recipient. Togetherness and cooperation mean that the child will respond with his own movements to the gestures begun by the adult. By addressing him, he prepares for what is going to happen. For example, the adult offers the sleeve by saying, “I would like to put this sleeve on your arm,” and then waits for the child to offer his arm. If, instead, the adult took the child’s arm and directly put on the sweater, the child would be denied an opportunity to participate.

By slowing down. This allows us to adapt to the child’s inner rhythm, and is an important aspect of respectful



Photo from Pikler Institute, Budapest, Hungary

togetherness. Having him anticipate what is about to happen prepares him to participate. There is always a verbal cue, followed by a pause signaling the child's awareness, after which comes the action.

By offering him time to adjust his body to what we are asking of him during mutual interactions. When the adult truly pays attention to each child's individual tempo, without rendering his movements redundant, the child does not feel pressured and is relaxed during the caregiving interactions. By noticing his expressions, and willingness to answer, we learn to respond to each child accordingly. It is also important that we adjust our activity to the child's movements. When the child turns onto his stomach, for example, we can change his diaper in this position. By doing so, the reciprocity becomes mutual.

Harmonious Experiences During Togetherness Enrich the Relationship

The adult's hands, guided by her loving awareness, become the source for healthy and prosperous experiences. Her gentle and caring gestures convey attentiveness and interest.

As Pikler wrote, "The infant who participates actively in his care, and lives in satisfactory emotional balance, will also be active in initiating beyond the ministrations of care." In



Photo by David Vigliotti, Little Learners Lodge, South Carolina

essence, this means that in infancy we are preparing the child for the rest of his life.

As a peaceful beginning includes adults slowing down and following each child's individual cues, it is up to us to decide precisely what kind of world we wish to create. If we want a more peaceful world, raising babies with respect can have a ripple effect as they grow up to be respectful human beings.

Wouldn't it be nice to have a more peaceful world? I invite you to draw attention to your own hands, and the message you want to convey to young children, as the future is, indeed, in our hands, our loving hands.

References

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