

Making connections

What do preschool teachers know about infant/toddler care and education?

by Janet Gonzalez-Mena

The answer to the question in the title is “Lots!” if they are fans of Lilian Katz.

I wouldn’t have said that before I sat down to read the new book Lilian wrote with her son Stephen. It’s called *Intellectual Emergencies*. It starts out with 12 of Lilian’s *principles* — a trademark of hers. Some of her principles I remembered from a class I took from Lilian back before either of us had any gray hairs.

Because I’m an infant-toddler person, I read always with an eye to how things relate to that age group. I found some perfect matches in this book and I want to pass them on to you, dear reader!



Janet Gonzalez-Mena was a student of Lilian Katz, Magda Gerber, and Anna Tardos. Today she does consulting and training in infant-toddler care, parenting, and diversity work.

Lilian Katz, Professor Emerita at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is the co-author (along with her son Stephen J. Katz) of *Intellectual Emergencies: Some Reflections on Mothering and Teaching*.

Anna Tardos, psychologist, is director of the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary, and continues the research started by her mother, Emmi Pikler.

Emmi Pikler was a researcher, theorist, and pediatrician who founded the Pikler Institute in Budapest, Hungary, in 1946. She died in 1984.

Magda Gerber was a Los Angeles infant specialist who founded Resources for Infant Educators (RIE), which is still going strong today. She was a friend and colleague of Emmi Pikler. Magda died in 2007.

How to do that perplexed me as I read along through the principles. Then I figured it out.

Lilian has her intellectual emergencies, and me, I have my flights of fantasy. So what did I do when I finished reading the principles in her book? Well, I put together a discussion and brought some of my favorite people to it! It’s fantasy, so it doesn’t matter that a couple of them aren’t with us any more.

Check out the scene. It’s a playroom with four infants, three mothers, and one father. Magda Gerber is there in a pink suit. All are sitting on the floor along with a young woman who is Magda’s intern. Magda is a small, white-haired woman with pretty curls; you may have seen her — or her picture. It’s up to you to imagine what the rest of them look like. Magda has a book in her hand — it’s Lilian’s *Intellectual Emergencies*. Next to Magda is Lilian herself — dressed up and looking really spiffy! She also has curls. I’m there too, I’m not sure what I’m wearing, but I have curls too. (Remember — this is a fantasy and I’ve always wanted curls.)

Magda turns to me and says in her soft Hungarian accent, “Janet, I understand you found that Lilian’s principles fit

what I teach about infant toddler care.”

I nod enthusiastically. Lilian sits up straight, looks at me, and says in her crisp rather British way, “Interesting! I wasn’t necessarily thinking about babies when I came up with the principles.”

“I want to hear about it,” urges Magda, getting up a little stiffly. “But not in front of the babies. Let’s be respectful.”

We three go into another room and find two more people there: a rather stern-looking, dignified older woman in a lab coat sitting up very straight in a chair and another who looks less stern and more homey. I recognize the first as Dr. Emmi Pikler, Magda’s friend and colleague from Budapest. The other is in a white blouse and dark skirt; a lab coat hangs on the chair behind her. She’s Anna Tardos, Dr. Pikler’s daughter, and a friend of mine. I introduce myself to Dr. Pikler, realizing she probably doesn’t remember me from when I met her back in the 1980s. Then I introduce Lilian and we all settle comfortably into chairs around a table. Magda puts Lilian’s book in the middle and they all turn to look at me.

“Let’s start with respect,” I say echoing the last word Magda said in the play-

room. I open Lilian's book to find a passage that I remembered. It says something like, "A respectful relationship between teacher and learner is marked by treating learners with dignity, listening closely and attentively to what the learners say."

Lilian smiles and adds, "You respect learners by being honest and not talking in silly sweet voices or heaping empty praise on them."

Magda looking into the playroom says, "I see an example of respect right now." We all turn to the observation window. The intern is talking to a baby who is fussing while he struggles to turn over so he can reach a toy he has been eyeing. The intern says in a matter-of-fact voice, "You really want that toy." There's no sticky sweetness to her tone and she isn't gushing sympathy — only acknowledging the baby's distress. She sits waiting quietly to see if the baby can solve his own problem. I say, "That fits right into this piece by Lilian, 'Respectful teaching conveys through the relationship confidence in the child's potential ability to overcome difficulties and to persist in the face of some inevitable obstacles.'"

The caregiver's tone we just heard and her expression says that the baby will succeed in solving his problem — if not now — eventually. She also conveys the attitude that there is no rush. She doesn't roll the baby over or hand him the toy. Finally, he rolls over all the way and grabs the toy. Nobody says, "Good job!"

Magda points out, "If the adult gushes or even mildly praises, that only distracts the baby from what he's doing and feeling." Then she adds, "He didn't roll over and get the toy to please the adult; he did it to please himself and that's what we want!"

"He's discovering that he is a capable person — a learner," adds Anna, turning

to look at Dr. Pikler who is thumbing through Lilian's book.

Dr. Pikler stops, looks at us, and begins to read. "Don't confuse what is exciting, amusing, and fun with what is educative." She looks up at Lilian, smiles and then goes on. "Excitement is appropriate for entertainment and special occasions; it is short-lived pleasure — easy come, easy go. But what is educative requires sustained effort and involvement, often includes many routine elements, and offers long-term deep satisfaction rather than momentary fun and excitement." She puts the book down and says emphatically, "I agree!"

Anna nods and looks from her mother to Lilian. She says, "I've noticed in this country babies are bombarded with all kinds of fancy entertaining toys."

Magda responds, "Yes — and then parents complain that their babies can't amuse themselves for even 5 minutes." Both she and Dr. Pikler are shaking their heads.

I say, "I've seen the difference with the babies in the Pikler Institute." They all know I'm referring to the residential nursery for infants and toddlers in Budapest that Dr. Pikler founded in 1946 and Anna now directs. "I was amazed to see how well babies there played on their own."

The conversation pauses for a minute and I take the opportunity to open the book and say, "Listen to Lilian's Principle 1: 'Teach the learners how to tell you where they are.'" I turn to Lilian and say, "You're talking about children who can talk, but Magda has the same principle for babies — she just uses different words. She says the adult is the learner and the baby is the teacher."

Magda adds, "The adult learns by observing."

Lilian says, "I also believe in teaching

children to say they don't need help right now."

"Yes," says Magda. "That's important. Caregivers have to assume that babies are giving the message that they don't need help when it comes to solving their own problems — like the rolling over we watched earlier. When caregivers avoid interrupting or interfering, babies grow up with the notion that they are capable. Of course, there are times that we do have to step in, but we also know that babies don't have to solve every problem they encounter. It's okay to feel frustrated sometimes."

"And then there's authenticity," I prompt — looking at the four wise women seated around me. "That's in the book, too." I say pointing.

Lilian offers, "I suggest that it is a good idea for young children to get clear messages from real and genuine persons."

"And that leads us to relationships," I say. Pikler and Anna smile broadly at that one. Relationships are Pikler's specialty. The success of her approach depends on the very special relationship between caregivers and infants in the Pikler Institute. The relationship must be close enough to provide each child with a sense of security.

"Relationships grow from respectful, responsive, reciprocal interactions," I say, smiling at Magda. "I learned that from you long ago and those interactions aren't just about social development — they are also closely connected to cognitive development."

Lilian grins, turns to page 21 of her book, and says, "That's right here. I wrote that recent research indicates that from the very beginning of life, development of a variety of basic cognitive capabilities benefit greatly from what we might call continuous contingent interaction."

She stops, looks up, and adds parenthetically with emphasis, “*Conversations.*” She goes on, “Extended interactions help build the neurological connections between the mid-brain area where emotions and motives are experienced and the prefrontal cortex where planning, effort, and self-regulation process occur.”

Dr. Pikler perks up and picks up the thread, “. . . *and* there needs to be something to have a conversation about — not just talk that’s fun and entertaining. . . .”

“Right,” says Lilian, “something that matters to the conversationalists — something meaningful and significant.”

“Oh yes,” says Magda, “and what is more interesting to babies than their own bodies? That’s why we value conversations that go on during caregiving routines, when the body and its needs are the focus. These conversations are also meaningful to the caregiver because she is working to involve the baby in the process.”

I sense our time is drawing to a close, so I say, “Lilian, the project approach is something precious you’ve given to the early childhood world. I can even find parallels with projects and what babies do.” I look at Dr. Pikler. “I’d call what you say about babies discovering their bodies a project of interest to even the youngest baby.”

Dr. Pikler responds. “People think babies are just lying there, but there’s more to it than that. Early on they are exploring each muscle group, how it works and gravity’s influence on movement. That’s why babies need to be free to move rather than strapped into various devices or propped up!”

Magda says, “And that’s a hard message to get across in this country. . . .”

Lilian is looking contemplative. “I never thought of any of that as the project approach. . . .”

Anna turns to Lilian and says, “Another type of project involves manipulation. The first major project along these lines begins when they first discover their hands. Later we introduce simple play objects — so they learn about the specific properties and characteristics of each.”

Noise from the other room makes us notice that the session is ending and soon this room will be needed. It’s hard to end the conversation with such interesting people, but it’s time to go. I think we all learned a lot — at least I did. Maybe the best thing about the conversation was being in a group of such intelligent and perceptive women!

Reference

Katz, L. G., & Katz, S. J. (2009). *Intellectual emergencies: Some reflections on mothering and teaching*. Lewisville, NC: Kaplan.