
Book Reviews

Birth to Three in Education and Care: Rudolf Steiner, Emmi Pikler and the Very Young Child

Edited by Heather Church
(WECAN, 2022)

Reviewed by Nancy Blanning

The publication of WECAN's new *Birth to Three in Education and Care—Rudolf Steiner, Emmi Pikler and the Very Young Child* is a real breakthrough in Waldorf Birth to Three work. This book marks two momentous events. The content of this book was drawn from the first-ever birth to three conference held at Sophia's Hearth in October 2019. This conference slipped in as an accomplished fact before the descent of the pandemic, gifting participants, and now readers, with four inspiring and stimulating keynote addresses.

The second momentous development is that this conference and this book mark a purposeful coming together of early childhood principles and practices that are affirmed by both Waldorf and Pikler pedagogies. This book explains that even though Rudolf Steiner and Emmi Pikler did not know each other, their views about the nature of the young child are complementary. Both held the utmost trust in the developmental wisdom that lives within each human baby and urged environments where the children are left free to achieve their own milestones—without a rigid expectation of timeline.

Rudolf Steiner again and again reiterated that each adult, each teacher, should be completely committed to respecting and honoring the being of the child and to not impose adult expectations that interfere with the child's healthy, natural unfolding. Steiner described the body-soul-spirit nature of every human being from before the first breath onward. Emmi Pikler did actual research in her home for children in Lóczy that implicitly confirms the wisdom of Steiner's insight into child development for the very youngest. It is essential that adult caregivers recognize children's right—and developmental need—for freedom of movement to find their own ways, along with warm, interested, respectful caregiving. Seeing these two complementary pictures of infants and toddlers placed together is reassuring and empowering to read.

The first keynote address was presented by Susan Weber, a pioneer who achieved her vision of a Birth to

Three care and training center with the founding of Sophia's Hearth, in Keene, NH. Susan's presentation revolved around the concept of "wayfinding." Indigenous people of the distant past navigated their way in unknown geographic regions and across oceans without any mechanical or technological instruments. They developed a sensitive relationship with the stars and planets, sun and moon, and swells of waves. In giving themselves over to the presence of these natural, guiding forces, they intuitively knew where they were and had no fear of being lost. Susan describes the very young child as one who is "wayfinding." Through the innate wisdom of movement, anchoring oneself in space through one's own "body compass" sends the child forth with a sense of freedom and confidence to find the way to uprightness, a major step toward true human personhood. Our job is to watch the children and offer environments which allow children to find their own way. The children experience that caring adults trust them to find their way, and are assured that their trust is safe to give reciprocally to the adult. Relationship grows.

Adult touch, gaze, and speech are the elements of caregiving discussed next by Katherine Scharff. Katherine's background includes having been a hospice nurse as well as an early childhood educator. As a nurse she helped the elderly make their passage to the spiritual world, and she sees the role of the early childhood educator as being to warmly welcome the new human from the spiritual to the earthly world, in as warm, gentle, and encouraging a way as possible. To build strength in this new relationship, the caregiver must become an attentive observer who learns to understand the baby's cues and communications. Babies learn through what they feel, see, and hear. These experiences should be the most inviting possible, in order to assure the baby that the choice to incarnate on the earth was a good one.

A quotation describing Dr. Pikler's approach describes this well: "Dr. Pikler suggests that every time an adult has an interaction with a child, she has the opportunity to speak to him, to address him, and to let him know that he matters; that she is there for him, that she is present, available, and accepting of him. She observes that the adult's gestures are imperative in creating a dialogue between her and the child."

Many examples of interactions with young children follow to illustrate the validity of this statement. Hand movements and gestures need to be gentle, slow, and tactful. Warm and non-confronting gaze is another avenue for building trust and relationship. Careful, unrushed speech with a warm tone of voice is also reassuring. Children confirm again and again that they experience these as kind and respectful invitations into the world.

Pediatric physical therapist and teacher trainer Jane Swain's deep knowledge of child development further confirms the need children have for self-initiated movement. Wending their way through their own sequential progression of movement achievements builds a strong, sensory-healthy body and also the beginnings of personal autonomy. Jane points to the compatibility of both Steiner's and Pikler's views on development: "Both Steiner and Pikler advocated that the infant be allowed the freedom to negotiate their own motor journey up into verticality at their own pace, in their own individualized way, without overt instruction and without encouragement from the adult. They trusted the infant's innate ability to learn to roll over by themselves, to know when to spend a longer or shorter time belly crawling, and ultimately how quickly or slowly to progress up into standing and walking."

This section explains how each step—back-lying, side-lying, tummy-lying, belly crawling, getting onto hands and knees, sitting, kneeling, squatting, and standing—all work to develop balance and security in movement and posture. While it is usually not recognized, all of these positional accomplishments develop balance and lay the foundation for orientation in space, directionality, and sequencing—all essential for success in the study of reading, writing, and mathematics. Giving children freedom to achieve

these motor milestones on their own is an important investment in their future capacities.

The final contribution to this rich collection comes from Debbie Laurin, PhD. Her study of child development and extensive study at the Pikler Institute in Budapest give her a strong grounding in Pikler pedagogy. In her presentation she shares research conducted on diapering practices and attitudes toward this caregiving. Research results confirm that different approaches either contribute to or undermine the positive relationship between child and caregiver.

Pikler caregiving emphasizes that moments of care—diapering, dressing, feeding—are precious opportunities to build a positive relationship with the child. These are seen as moments for the caregiver and child to bond in a cooperative, mutually respectful partnership. Speech can be unhurried and personally address the child with warmth. The adult explains what is going to happen and invites the child's participation as well. The whole procedure is a chance to acknowledge and appreciate the child as opposed to giving a perfunctory, quick diaper change that is efficient but impersonal. The conclusions of this research point clearly to the positive relationship building of this more gentle, interested interaction.

Each of these four presentations offers evidence that gentle, involved, warm, unhurried caregiving builds positive relationships between children and adults. Mainstream research is also confirming that positive relationship with a caring adult is key to healthy social-emotional growth. Unrestricted freedom of movement in a safe environment builds autonomy. The child implicitly experiences that they have the inner capacity to find their own way in childhood and adult life beyond. What a blessing this little book is, as it describes so well how we can participate in this healthy unfolding with very young children. ♦

Toward a Kinder, More Compassionate Society: Working Together Toward Change Forthcoming 2023 from WECAN

In February 2022, the conference of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America focused on bringing greater awareness of Black Lives Matter and other efforts in radical empathy and inclusion to Waldorf early childhood programs. Keynote speakers and workshop leaders, speaking from a wealth of Black, Brown, Indigenous, LGBTQ+ experience and

more, adapted their presentations for this unique and urgently needed anthology.

Introducing the book, the WECAN board offers an accountability statement, professing, in part:

To educate our children in and toward freedom we must understand not only the developmental needs

of children but also the context of the society and structures that influence them and us . . . As Waldorf early childhood practitioners, we are invited to develop the spiritual attributes of greatheartedness, humility, curiosity, interest, wonder, and integrity. In these unique and challenging times, we are being asked to see clearly, without any veil of illusion, what influences us. We are being asked to be willing to change, to respond, and to transform. This is potent, painful, powerful, essential work. With collaborative, sensitive, and honest activity, we can go forward together.

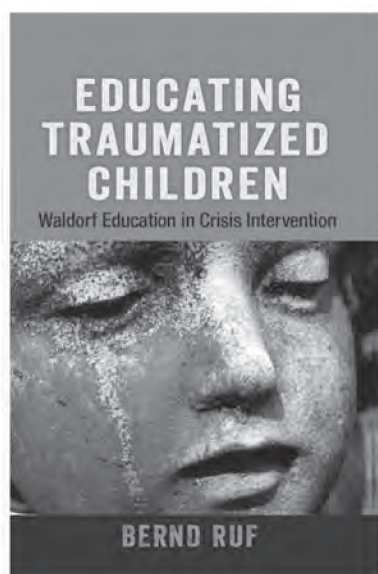
As a biracial parent who brought her first child to the Waldorf kindergarten in 1999, I wish I'd had this scholarship to comfort me and make me feel less alone in my concerns about what's come to be known as "representation." I could bring dolls with darker skin and clothing that evoked the Philippines, my mother's birth nation, to my home; I could incorporate stories about Asian and Italian immigrants and world mythologies into our bedtime routines. But it was painful to experience anew, on my son's behalf, the separation between what was true at home and

what was represented as true at school. The "world is good and beautiful" philosophy of the Waldorf early childhood classroom came mostly in hues of pink and gold, and through stories that featured people who did not look or act much like my ancestors. For families that have histories and experiences that involve racial diversity, gender fluidity, expansive sexualities, and more, the question of whether a Waldorf education will be true to the challenges they face in the world is posed daily and intensely.

The Waldorf nursery and kindergarten classrooms and their loving guardians, the formidable and fiercely human early childhood faculty, will be all the healthier and stronger for exploring the vulnerabilities exposed in *Toward a Kinder, More Compassionate Society*. For readers like me who feel a little shiver to read phrases like #sayhername, "decolonize" the classroom, "radical empathy," and "racial identity development" in a text about Waldorf early childhood education, *Toward a Kinder, More Compassionate Society* is a long-awaited glimpse into the expanded horizons of an "education for the future." ♦

—Donna Miele, WECAN Publications Coordinator

Recommended Reading



Educating Traumatized Children Waldorf Education in Crisis Intervention

**By Bernd Ruf
(Lindisfarne Books, 2013)**

Since this book was published in 2013, the world has seen increasing crises and trauma. The book's author, Bernd Ruf, has organized teams of teachers to go to places of crisis with Emergency Pedagogy. With therapeutic understanding and artistic activities, such as painting, drawing, modeling, puppetry, storytelling and movement, it is possible to lessen the traumatic impacts on children and point them on a pathway toward healing. What is described in the first portion of the book under "Psychological Trauma" gives insightful information to all teachers. Everyone in our world is unsettled and some truly traumatized. This book gives information for recognizing, understanding, and responding to trauma, much of which we can apply to our own classrooms. ♦