

# Being with Babies

by Anna Tardos

PHOTO BY MILAN JUREK

Babies have a marvelous affect on us. They enchant us. They touch us very profoundly. I think I am not mistaken to claim that nobody could go past even a stranger's baby stroller without stopping and smiling at it. Every baby and, of course, our own children awaken indescribable emotions in us. We bend over our babies again and again and take pleasure in them when they are asleep, and watch for their smiles when they are awake. We would most of all love to constantly hold them in our arms.

All of the above is true. And yet, not quite. Many times it happens that in the important moments of being together we do not really pay attention to them, because we are preoccupied with the tasks relating to them: putting on their shirts, wiping their bottoms, adjusting their diapers. We touch them, move them around, and sometimes fail to notice the expectation in their gaze as they look at us. We don't think about how happy they would be 'to help' if we had a discussion with them in the meantime, and if we told them what we were up to:



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PHOTO TAKEN IN THE PIKLER INSTITUTE BY REISMANN

"Now, I am going to take off your diaper to see if there is anything in it. I am going to wipe your skin, lift your bottom. Will you allow me to do that? Now, I am going to put this coat on you. You see how pretty it is? Your grandmother made it for you. First I am pulling up on one arm, then the other. I have to lift you up a little bit. It's not very easy, but we have made it."

Would they help? Yes. The baby would pay attention to what we are doing, would relax his arms, and, at the age of only a few months, he would reach his arms towards us when we show him

the shirt. A real conversation can be formed this way between the adult and the baby. In this way, the hasty and careless movements that often cast a shadow on the joint activity during times spent together could be avoided: legs lifted too high, too swiftly being turned on the side, the baby's arm getting stuck in the sleeve, or legs stuck in the zippered (not very practical) overalls. This can be a very unpleasant experience for the baby. And it also happens that, instead of a rich and meaningful dialogue realized in the



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course of the pleasure of being together, the adult must dress a crying and protesting baby. At this time, the adult would try to calm the baby down: "I can see that you are tired. Alright, I am going to hurry, and we're going to be done real soon." Meanwhile, the movements become even faster, and quite often overhasty, thus even more unpleasant for the child. It's a shame. Why? Because the activity of getting dressed or changed, repeated several times a day, can also be a joyful encounter of being together!

Outside the family setting, it is especially dangerous if the activity of changing and dressing the baby is not done in this joyous way. In a child care center or an institution, the baby is taken care of not by his mother, father, or grandmother looking at him with loving pride, but another person: a professional, a caregiver, an educator. A caregiver has to take care of several babies — one after the other; and no matter

how much she loves children, since that is why she chose this career, she cannot look at every single baby with the proud, heartwarming, adoring love of a mother. And I want to say more: it cannot even be expected of her. It would not be realistic. And, unfortunately, in reality her moves very easily become mechanical, fast, and routine-like. Being together often takes place without words, in an impersonal way. In a 'good case,' the infant does not protest, but endures passively, and perhaps makes the being together difficult by tensing his muscles. And thus, it is not a pleasure for either party: neither for the infant, nor for the adult.

How can it be helped? Should the caregiver be expected to love every child she has to take care of like a mother? But that is impossible. Yes, that is impossible. Love cannot be prescribed, especially not motherly affections. But it can be helped. There are some small, very simple rules, and, if the caregiver

follows them, the atmosphere of being together will be completely different, and it will be more and more pleasurable for both the baby and the adult to be together during care. Eventually, with time, the adult will not have to think about the rules and follow them. It becomes natural that she approaches the baby as a partner, with personal





interest and tactfulness, and her wiping, cleaning, undressing, and dressing him and changing his diaper will ultimately be the meeting of two human beings. A real encounter, when the infant is not only the *object* of everything happening to him, but a *participant* as well.

Listed below are a few rules that have been formed and polished and worked out based on the experience of a few decades in the Pikler Institute in Budapest, on the basis of the teachings of Hungarian pediatrician Emmi Pikler. In the Institute, hundreds of abandoned, orphaned infants were brought up to become healthy personalities as young grown-ups (proven by follow-up studies), in spite of the fact that they had to do without the warmth of family love at their most vulnerable age.

■ **Never pick up an infant unexpectedly into your arms in a way that is startling for him.** Address him, look for his gaze. If he is asleep and you still have to pick him up, address him, gently caress his face, and wait until he stretchingly wakes up. Once eye contact has been established, tell him that he is going to be picked up. Yes, even with an infant only a few days or weeks old. Then reach out for him only afterwards.

■ **Moves should never be overly hasty.** Allow enough time with your ges-

tures for him to prepare for what is going to happen. For example, touch him gently, place your hands carefully under his head and body, and then lift him a few moments later.

■ **Help him also with words to prepare him for what is going to happen.**

This also means that we are never silent while together, but speak to him; have a conversation. Speak to him about what is going to be done, what kind of clothes will be taken out that are going to be put on him. About which part of his body will be touched. Talk to him, inform him, not only while the action is being done, but also before it is started: "I am going to pull your arm over the sleeve of the coat. Yes, this arm of yours. Thank you." Believe it or not the miracle will take place at the age of only a few months. Smiling, the baby will, although uncertainly, lift his arm when the adult's hand is reaching out for it. And what a pleasure it is for the adult, and what a pleasure for the baby!

■ **The baby must be listened to when the adult is caring for him.** He must be responded to. In a relationship created this way the content of the conversation will be richer and richer, and the infant will get responses to his manifestations. The caregiver may say, for example, "I can see that you like this nice warm coat. Yes, I see, you are sleepy now. You have just yawned. I am going to put you in your bed real soon. Here we are, I am going to put you down in your bed. And now I am covering you. Sweet dreams!" A baby of only a few months already absorbs the words aimed at him. And he helps the caring adult to stay with him with her attention — her thoughts, her interest — even if it is the third or the eighth child whose diapers she has changed that morning.

These are simple rules; there is nothing surprising about them. And still it is worth observing ourselves to see whether this is really how we are acting, and whether we utilize the opportunities of being together with children to create a more substantial dialogue with gestures, gaze, and speech, in which the infant also can feel like he is a real partner and an active participant, and which makes the being together more joyful for the adult in the moments of care repeated throughout the day.

