



# Enhancing the Diapering Routine: Caring, Communication, and Development

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Standing on the changing table, 19-month-old Lilly smiles at Ms. Ute, her caregiver. Lilly's tiny hands hold on to the support rail to help her keep her balance as she responds to Ms. Ute's words and gestures. Both child and caregiver engage in a choreographed routine as Ms. Ute undresses Lilly for her diaper change. The routine is a responsive partnership, with each person respectfully communicating and cooperating. Lilly lifts her legs one at a time as Ms. Ute removes Lilly's overalls. Ms. Ute talks softly, moving slowly, pausing, and allowing time for Lilly's participation.

Ms. Ute says, "*Kaki*" (Hungarian for *poo*), and Lilly repeats it several times as she looks curiously at the diaper that Ms. Ute has just removed. As she washes Lilly, Ms. Ute explains her actions and describes the diaper rash cream she is about to use. Lilly shows keen interest in the cream. Ms. Ute dips her fingers into the cream and holds her fingers out for Lilly to see. Unhurriedly and with care, Ms. Ute applies the cream to Lilly's rash. Lilly helps spread some of the cream herself.

"Now it's time to put on a clean diaper," Ms. Ute says as she holds up two diapers for Lilly to choose from. Lilly points to the one she wants and says, "Mama." Ms. Ute responds, "Yes,

Mama diapers Lilly too.” Ms. Ute carefully puts the diaper on Lilly, front to back, following Lilly’s movements as Ms. Ute closes the diaper’s sticky tabs. Lilly gazes at Ms. Ute’s shirt and reaches out to touch the buttons. Seeing Lilly’s curiosity, Ms. Ute talks to her about the buttons’ color and texture.

Lilly shifts her attention to getting dressed, assisting Ms. Ute by stepping into her overalls. She adjusts her hands on the rail for support. Lilly watches intently while Ms. Ute closes the snaps on the overalls’ shoulder straps. As Lilly playfully pulls the snaps apart, Ms. Ute says, “I can see that you know how to unsnap your overalls.” Lilly is learning, trying, and doing some things herself. Ms. Ute finishes and offers a cloth to Lilly, who takes it and wipes her hands. Ms. Ute carefully wipes Lilly’s hands one last time before lifting her from the changing table. Ready to return to the play area, Lilly retrieves a toy she placed on the nearby shelf before her diaper change.

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This vignette is an observation of an actual diapering at Lóczy, the early care and education program at the Emmi Pikler Day Care Center, or Pikler House, in Budapest, Hungary. Some of these practices may differ from those typically used in US programs serving infants and toddlers. For example, toys or other objects are not used as distractions during diapering. Instead, they are set aside to ensure that children and caregivers fully engage in the diapering relationship. Another difference is that Lilly stands up and holds on to a rail during the diaper change, which enables her to move and participate.

Diapering offers reoccurring opportunities to support learning through relationship-based interactions, cooperation, and communication.

The pace is slow and relaxed, with ongoing communication between the caregiver and Lilly. This helps Lilly anticipate each step in the process. She makes decisions and is an active partner in undressing and dressing herself. While participating in the diaper-changing routine, Lilly is learning language and self-help skills, and developing autonomy, self-regulation, and other capabilities.

# Diapering and responsive care

Infants and toddlers experience an average of 5,000 diaper changes in their young lives (Gerber 2000; Lally 2013). In most programs and homes, diapering occurs at a fast pace, with the emphasis on speedy completion. For children, this results in missed opportunities for one-on-one interactions, language experiences, and involvement in their bodily care and sense of agency.

The intimate nature of diapering, both in center care and at home, offers reoccurring opportunities to support young children’s learning and development through relationship-based interactions, cooperation, and communication between caregivers and babies. These early diapering experiences also powerfully influence how babies begin to feel about their bodies and bodily functions. When a caregiver takes time to tune in to each child’s individuality and interacts patiently and gently, the child perceives that the caregiver enjoys their time together, which builds a strong, supportive relationship between them (Tardos 1994, 2016).

Research on best practices emphasizes the importance of individualized infant and toddler care for building relationships, assessing development, and embedding learning opportunities for young children in everyday routines (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer 2007; Tanyel & Knopf 2011). However, research reveals that less caregiver involvement and less elaborate communication with children takes place during diapering routines than during play (Wilcox-Herzog & Ward 2004; Degotardi & Davis 2008; Degotardi 2010).

Developmentally appropriate practice for infants and toddlers calls for a warm, close relationship between a caregiver and child: “Treated as a personal, one-on-one interaction—where the caregiver seeks the baby’s attention and cooperation—diapering builds a sense of teamwork, and their relationship grows as a result” (Copple et al. 2013, 62).

## Diapering at the Pikler House

Do you remember when you first learned to change a diaper? It may have been a difficult, awkward, tense, and even fearful experience. With practice, you became efficient. But diapering is about more than gaining efficiency; it requires developing self-awareness about how to observe and respond to a child’s signals. Knowing diapering hygienic protocols is important, but that knowledge should coexist with the caregiver–child relationship. (See “Using Elements of the Pikler Approach for Diapering.”)



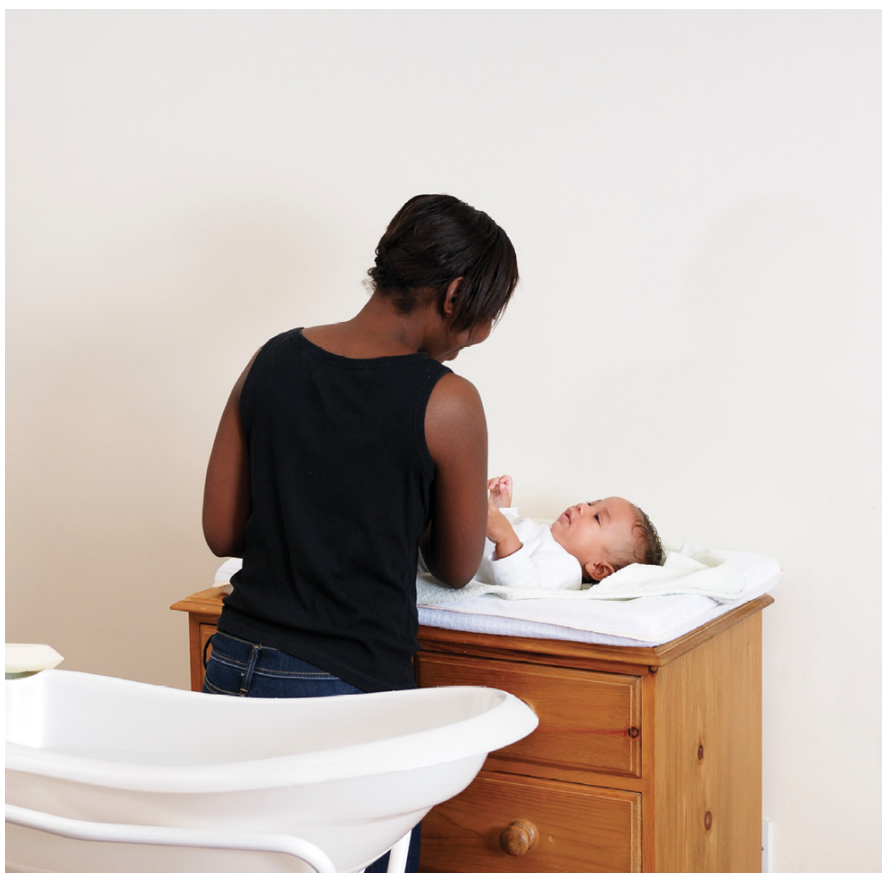
A caregiver at the Emmi Pikler Day Care Center noted, “You have to remember to think like you are the child.” By doing so, a diapering routine becomes an opportunity for understanding each other’s intent and different mental and emotional states (Gaffan et al. 2010; Colombo et al. 2012). ) The most critical element is the different types of talk a caregiver uses with a child during the diapering process so the child knows, is ready for, and can participate in what occurs.

## Types of talk

During diapering at the Pikler House, the caregiver uses several types of talk to describe, explain, and communicate actions in an unfolding back-and-forth process similar to adult conversations (Bodrova & Leong 2007). Back-and-forth, or serve-and-return, exchanges are meaningful: the caregiver *returns* the child’s *serves* with relevant information by responding to the child’s interest and actions, following the child’s gaze or gesture, or responding to the child’s vocalizations and babble. This tuning in to each other (sometimes referred to as *mentalization*), which can take place during diapering routines, forms the foundation for infant brain development (Shonkoff 2017).

Diapering requires developing self-awareness about how to observe and respond to a child’s signals.

Using expressive and responsive language strategies during diapering promotes infant and toddler language, social, emotional, motor, and cognitive development (Wittmer & Petersen 2010). The types of talk used during diapering routines should be individualized to the developmental capabilities of each infant and toddler. (For descriptions of several types of talk, with examples of how they may be used in the diapering process, see “Using Different Types of Caregiver Talk during Diapering,” below.)



Diapering routines allow caregivers to engage with each child, ideally in the child's home language. Reaching out to family members, caregivers can learn a few words in each child's home language; as a reminder, they can create and hang a poster near the changing area with simple phrases in the various languages. (To support pronunciation, consider writing each word twice: correctly and phonetically.) Using a child's home language demonstrates its importance and helps bridge the home and care environments. Encouraging families to continue speaking their home language contributes to linguistic continuity, which supports infants and toddlers in their identity formation (Sánchez & Thorp 1998a, 1998b; Thorp & Sánchez 1998; De Houwer 1999).

Caregiver dialogue should be personal, rich, and warm. Infants and toddlers cooperating with caregivers are motivated by a sense of pleasure and agency (Vincze 1994). At times, the child may playfully depart from the caregivers' request, instead following other interests; but that, too, supports language development and relationship building. For instance, when Lilly lightheartedly pulled her overall snaps apart, she broke from the choreography of dressing to explore this clothing element. Instead of scolding her, Ms. Ute followed Lilly's lead and narrated using parallel talk: "I can see that you know how to unsnap your overalls." After pausing and having her new skill acknowledged, Lilly was ready to finish dressing.

## Using Elements of the Pikler Approach for Diapering

1. **Speak to the infant or toddler.** Before picking the child up, address the child, pause, and wait for eye contact

Approach the child from the front and show your hands, palms facing up. “I’m going to change your diaper. Are you ready?” “Now I am going to pick you up.” “I see you’re ready for your diaper change.” (Tardos 2011, 88). Talking about what’s going to happen reduces the likelihood of startling the child. Infants are developing their first sense of self, safety, and trust through contact with others and with their caregivers (Lally 2009).

2. **Give the child time to process.** Allow the infant or toddler time to absorb and prepare for what is going to happen.

Let the child transition from his activity to diapering. Tell him, “Soon it will be time to change your diaper.” If the child resists, leave him for a short while and change another child, or all the children, before returning to him. Inform the child, “After you play a little while, I will return to diaper you.”

With an infant, first touch the child gently before carefully placing your hands under his head and body, pausing before lifting. “I am lifting you in my arms now and will place you here on the change table” (Tardos 2011, 88).

For older infants and toddlers, offering two diapers for the child to choose from engages the child in the diapering process. Inviting the child to decide between the diapers, pointing to the diaper patterns, and describing the images, colors, or shapes gives the child time to adjust to the diapering and respond to the choice, slowing the process down so it doesn’t feel tense or rushed. The child is often happy during the next diaper change if the caregiver tries to remember his diaper preference and says, “I remember that you liked this diaper before” (Tardos 2016).

- 3. Describe what is happening.** Talk with the child, describing what you are doing and preparing her for what will happen next.

A child benefits when caregiver communication occurs in a conversational style rich with different types of talk. Communicate in a variety of ways, pausing frequently to allow the child to process and respond to your words and actions. When you talk about the clothes the child is going to wear, what part of the body you are touching or cleaning with the wipes, and what you are going to do next, the child absorbs information about herself and the diapering process. Speak positively about the diapering experience and avoid facial expressions that show distaste or comments referring to smelliness, messiness, or dirtiness.

Tardos (2011, 86) offers a simple example: “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, please. 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 one arm, then the other. I have to lift you up a little bit. It’s not very easy, but we have made it. Thank you.”

- 4. Listen and observe.** Pay close attention to the child to notice and interpret her actions and responses.

The conversational content of the relationship will grow when a caregiver responds to the child’s interest and expressions. For example, a caregiver may remark, “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!” (Tardos 2016).

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Using Different Types of Caregiver Talk during Diapering	
Type of talk	Typical caregiver talk
<b>Anticipatory</b> Verbalize what is going to happen in the near future to prepare the child for the transition.	"I'm going to change your diaper. Are you ready?" "After you play for a little while, I will return to diaper you."
<b>Parallel</b> Narrate and comment on activities for the child.	"I am putting cream on your skin. The cream helps your rash get better." "I see that you know how to unsnap your overalls."
<b>Explanatory</b> Offer cause-and-effect statements, giving reasons for activities, social interactions, and emotions.	"I'm putting my gloves on to change your diaper." Put gloves on so child can see that the language matches the action. "It's time to wipe your skin so we can make sure you're all clean. Will you allow me to do that? Lift your bottom. Thank you."
<b>Descriptive</b> Describe and explain the features of an object, activity, or person. This may include specific words (referring to clothing, smells, cleaning, etc., while avoiding negativity) to help the child learn vocabulary for his preferences and actions.	"Look, you are wearing your striped pants today." "You have chosen the red bib with the picture of a bumblebee on it."
<b>Self-talk</b> Talk to yourself, commenting on actions or narrating activities to the child. Caregivers should use self-talk frequently to comment on the child's actions.	"You are grasping my glove with your fingers." "Do you feel the texture of the glove?" "It's a bit cold and slippery isn't it?" "I see you yawning; you must be sleepy now. Soon, when I have finished with your diaper change, I am going to put you in your crib." "I see you are kicking your legs." "Are you excited about having a fresh diaper?"
<b>Decontextualized</b> Make a reference to an activity, person, or object that is not visually present or in the room.	"Soon, I am going to put you down in your bed for a nap and cover you." "You're listening to the sounds of your friends playing in the other room. You were playing there, too, with the blocks. When we finish changing your diaper, you can return to your friends."
<b>Home language</b> Learn a few words in each child's home language. Place a chart of words and phrases at the diapering change area as a reminder.	"Are you ready?" / "Estás listo?" (Spanish) "It's time to change your diaper." / "Es hora de cambiar tu pañal." "Here is your diaper." / "Aquí está tu pañal."
Adapted from Kovach, Patrick, & Briley 2012; Kovach 2013; and Atkins-Burnett et al. 2015.	

# Conclusion

Embedding elements of the Pikler approach into existing diapering routines enriches the caregiver–child relationship and enhances young children’s learning and development. When a caregiver seeks the cooperation and attention of an infant or toddler, a diapering partnership is created that supports developmentally appropriate practices (Copple et al. 2013). As Ms. Ute demonstrated in the opening vignette, diapering can be a warm experience that conveys a powerful message to the child’s developing sense of self. Lilly was a welcome participant in her care; she knew what to expect because Ms. Ute previewed and narrated the moment-to-moment occurrences, giving Lilly time to understand and contribute to the interaction.

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**Audience:** *Teacher*

**Age:** *Infant/Toddler*

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