

What is Waldorf Early Childhood Education?

By Susan Howard – This article was published in Gateways, the newsletter of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America, in 2006.

Waldorf Early Childhood Education in Practice

The Waldorf early childhood educator works with the young child by creating a warm, beautiful and loving home-like environment, which is protective and secure, and where things happen in a predictable, rhythmic manner. Here she responds to the developing child in two basic ways:

First, she engages in domestic, practical, and artistic activities the children can readily imitate (for example, baking, painting, gardening, and handwork), adapting the work to the changing seasons and festivals of the year.

Secondly, the Waldorf early childhood educator nurtures the children's power of imagination by telling carefully selected stories and by encouraging play. Play, in which children act out scenarios of their own creation, helps them to experience many aspects of life more deeply. When toys are used, they are made of natural materials. Wool, cotton, wood, silk, shells, stones, pine cones and objects from nature that the children themselves have collected are used in play and to beautify the classroom.

Sensory integration, hand-eye coordination, appreciating the beauty of language, sequencing, and other basic skills necessary for the foundation of academic learning beyond kindergarten are fostered in a Waldorf early childhood program. In this truly loving, natural and creative environment, children are provided with a range of activities to prepare them for later learning and for life itself.

What Children Need

The Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education

Is there a Waldorf early childhood education curriculum? Are there specific activities – puppet plays, circle games, watercolor painting, for example – that are essential to a Waldorf program? Are there certain materials and furnishings – lazured, soft-colored walls, handmade dolls, beeswax crayons, silk and other natural materials – that are necessary ingredients in a Waldorf setting?

What makes Waldorf early childhood education “Waldorf”?

Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf Education, spoke on a number of occasions about the experiences that are essential for the healthy development of the young child. These include:

- Love and warmth

- An environment that nourishes the senses
- Creative experiences
- Meaningful adult activity to be imitated
- Imaginative play
- Protection of the forces of childhood
- Gratitude, reverence, and wonder
- Joy, humor, and happiness
- Adult caregivers pursuing a path of inner development

Love and Warmth

Children who live in an atmosphere of love and warmth, and who have around them truly good examples to imitate, are living in their proper element. – Rudolf Steiner, The Education of the Child

Love and emotional warmth, rather than any particular early childhood program, create the basis for the child's healthy development. These qualities should live between the adult caregiver and the child, in the children's behavior toward one another, and among the adults in the early childhood center. When Rudolf Steiner visited the class of the first Waldorf School, he often asked the children, "Do you love your teacher?"

Children are also served if this love and warmth exist in the relationship between the teachers and the parents, between the early childhood teachers and the rest of the school and in the surrounding community.

An Environment that Nourishes the Senses

The essential task of the teacher is to create the proper physical environment around the children. "Physical environment" must be understood in the widest sense imaginable. It includes not just what happens around the children in the material sense, but everything that occurs in their environment, everything that can be perceived by their senses, that can work on the inner powers of the children from the surrounding physical space. – Rudolf Steiner, The Education of the Child

Early learning is profoundly connected to the child's own physical body and sensory experience. Everything the young child sees, hears, and touches has an effect. Thus a clean, orderly, beautiful, quiet setting is essential.

The physical environment, both indoors and outdoors, should provide varied and nourishing opportunities for self-education – experiences in touch, balance, lively and joyful movement, and also inward listening. The children should experience large-group, small-group, and solitary activities.

The teacher, in integrating diverse elements into a harmonious and meaningful environment, provides surroundings that are accessible to the child's understanding, feeling, and active will – they are developmentally appropriate for the age they serve. The care, love, and intention expressed through the outer materials and furnishings of the classes are experienced unconsciously by the child. The child experiences the immediate environment as ensouled and nurturing.

The adult shapes the temporal environment as well as the spatial. Through a rhythmic schedule, in which the same thing happens at the same time on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis, the child gains a sense of security and confidence in the world. Also, the different activities of the day should take place in a comfortable flow with smooth transitions.

Creative Experience

In order to become true educators, we must be able to see the truly aesthetic element in the work, to bring an artistic quality into our tasks...If we bring this aesthetic element, then we begin to come closer to what the child wills out of its own nature. – Rudolf Steiner, A Modern Art of Education

In the early childhood class, the art of education is the art of living. The teacher is an artist in how she perceives and relates to the children and to the activities of daily life. She orchestrates and choreographs the rhythms of each day, each week, and each season in such a way that the children can breathe freely in a living structure.

In addition, the teacher offers the children opportunities for artistic experiences in singing and music, in movement and gesture – through eurythmy and rhythmic games – and in creative speech and language – through verses, poetry, and stories. The children model with beeswax, draw and do watercolor painting. Puppet shows put on by the teacher are an important element in the life of the Waldorf early childhood classroom.

Meaningful Adult Activity as Examples for the Child's Imitation

The task of the teacher is to adapt the practical activities of daily life so that they are suitable for the child's imitation through play...The activities of children in kindergarten must be derived directly from life itself rather than being "thought out" by the intellectualized culture of adults. In the kindergarten, the most important thing is to give children the opportunity to directly imitate life itself.

– Rudolf Steiner, The Child's Changing Consciousness

Real, meaningful work with a purpose, adjusted to the needs of the child, is in accordance with the child's natural and inborn need for movement, and is an enormously significant educational activity. The teacher focuses on the meaningful activities that nurture life in the classroom "home" such as cooking

and baking, gardening, doing laundry and cleaning, creating and caring for the materials in the immediate environment, and taking care of the bodily needs of the children.

This directed attention of the teacher creates an atmosphere of freedom in which the individuality of each child can be active. It is not intended just that the children copy the outer movements and actions of the adult, but that they experience also the inner attitude – the devotion, care, sense of purpose, focus, and creative spirit of the adult.

Imaginative play

Giving direction and guidance to play is one of the essential tasks of sensible education, which is to say an art of education that is right for humanity...The early childhood educator must school her observation in order to develop an artistic eye, to detect the individual quality of each child's play.

– Rudolf Steiner, Lecture of February 24, 1921 in Utrecht, The Netherlands

Little children learn through play. They approach play in an entirely individual way, out of their unique configuration of soul and spirit, and out of their unique experiences of the world in which they live. The manner in which a child plays may offer a picture of how he will take up his destiny as an adult.

The task of the teacher is to create an environment that supports the possibility of healthy play. This environment includes the physical surroundings, furnishings, and play materials; the social environment of activities and social interactions; and the inner/spiritual environment of thoughts, intentions, and imaginations held by the adults.

Protection for the Forces of Childhood

Although it is highly necessary that each person should be fully awake in later life, the child must be allowed to remain as long as possible in the peaceful, dreamlike condition of pictorial imagination in which his early years of life are passed. For if we allow his organism to grow strong in this nonintellectual way, he will rightly develop in later life the intellectuality needed in the world today.

– Rudolf Steiner, A Modern Art of Education

The lively, waking dream of the little child's consciousness must be allowed to thrive in the early childhood years. This means that the teacher refrains as much as possible from an excess of verbal instruction. Instead, her gestures, actions, and use of song provide a model for the child's guidance and imitation. Familiar daily rhythms and activities provide a context where the need for verbal instruction is

reduced. Simple, archetypal imagery in stories, songs, and games provides experiences that the children can internalize but that do not require intellectual or critical reflection or explanation.

An Atmosphere of Gratitude, Reverence, and Wonder

An atmosphere of gratitude should grow naturally in children through merely witnessing the gratitude the adults feel as they receive what is freely given by others, and in how they express this gratitude. If a child says “thank you” very naturally – not in response to the urging of others, but simply through imitating – something has been done that will greatly benefit the child’s whole life. Out of this an all-embracing gratitude will develop toward the whole world. This cultivation of gratitude is of paramount importance.

– Rudolf Steiner, The Child’s Changing Consciousness

Out of these early, all-pervading experiences of gratitude, the first tender capacity for love, which is deeply embedded in each and every child, begins to sprout in earthly life.

If, during the first period of life, we create an atmosphere of gratitude around the children, then out of this gratitude toward the world, toward the entire universe, and also out of thankfulness for being able to be in this world, a profound and warm sense of devotion will arise...upright, honest, and true.

– Rudolf Steiner, The Child’s Changing Consciousness

This is the basis for what will become a capacity for deep, intimate love and commitment in later life, for dedication and loyalty, for true admiration of others, for fervent spiritual or religious devotion, and for placing oneself wholeheartedly in the service of the world.

Joy, Humor, and Happiness

The joy of children in and with their environment must therefore be counted among the forces that build and shape the physical organs. They need teachers who look and act with happiness and, most of all, with honest, unaffected love. Such a love that streams, as it were, with warmth through the physical environment of the children may be said to literally “hatch out” the forms of the physical organs.

– Rudolf Steiner, The Education of the Child

The teacher's earnestness about her work and her serious striving must be balanced with humor and a demeanor that bespeaks happiness. There must be moments of humor and delight in the classroom every day.

Adult Caregivers on a Path of Inner Development

Just think what feelings arise in the soul of the early childhood educator who realizes: What I accomplish with this child, I accomplish for the grown-up person in his twenties. What matters is not so much a knowledge of abstract educational principles or pedagogical rules...What does matter is that a deep sense of responsibility develops in the teacher's heart and mind and that this affects her or his worldview and the way she or he stands in life.

– Rudolf Steiner, Education in the Face of the Present-Day World Situation

Here we come to the spiritual environment of the early childhood setting: the thoughts, attitudes, and imaginations living in the adult who cares for the children. This invisible realm that lies behind the outer actions of the teacher has a profound influence on the child's development.

The spiritual environment includes recognition of the child as a threefold being – of body, soul, and spirit – on a path of evolutionary development. This recognition provides a foundation for the daily activities in the early childhood classroom, and for the relationship between adult and child.

Such an understanding of the nature and destiny of the human comes out of the inner life of the adult, the life of the individual Ego. This is a realm that is largely hidden, and hence is difficult to observe directly and to evaluate objectively. Yet ultimately this realm may affect the development of the children most profoundly. It is not merely our outer activity that influences the growing child. What lies behind and is expressed through this outer activity also is crucial. Ultimately, the most profound influence on the child is who we are as human beings – and who we are becoming and how.

Conclusion

The “essentials” described here are qualitative in nature. For the most part, they are not part of a body of concrete “best practices.” Instead, they concern inner qualities and attributes of the teacher that foster healthy development in young children. These qualities can come to expression in a wide variety of ways, according to:

- The age range of the children in the group and their individual characteristics
- The nature of the particular program – infant care, toddler care, preschool, kindergarten, playgroup, or extended care
- The environment, culture, and surroundings

Many practices that have come to be associated with Waldorf/Steiner early childhood education – certain daily rhythms and routines, play materials, songs, stories, even the colors of the walls, the dress of the adults, and the menu for morning snack – may be mistakenly taken as essentials. The results of

such assumptions can be surprising, even disturbing – a “king winter” nature table appearing in a program located in a tropical climate in “wintertime,” or dolls with pink skin and yellow hair in a kindergarten where all the children are brown-skinned and black-haired. Such practices may express a tendency toward a doctrinal or dogmatic approach that is out of touch with the realities of the immediate situation and instead imposes something from “outside.”

There is a parallel concern at the other end of the spectrum from the doctrinal or dogmatic. The freedom that Waldorf Education offers each individual teacher to determine the practices of her early childhood program can be misinterpreted to mean that “anything goes,” according to personal preference and style. Here too, there is the danger that the developmental realities and needs of the children are not sufficiently taken into consideration.

Each of these one-sided approaches may be injurious to the development of the children. As Waldorf early childhood educators, we are constantly seeking a middle, universally human path between polarities.

Rudolf Steiner’s advice to the first Waldorf Kindergarten teacher, Elizabeth Grunelius, in the early 1920s, can be paraphrased as follows:

Observe the children. Actively meditate. Follow your intuitions. Work so that all your actions are worthy of imitation.

Today, those of us who work with young children in a Waldorf environment are challenged to engage in a constant process of renewal. We must actively observe the children in our care, carry them in our meditations, and seek to work consciously and artistically to create the experiences that will serve their development. Our devotion to this task awakens us to the importance of self-education and transformation in the context of community. Our ongoing study of child and human development, our own artistic and meditative practices, and our work with Anthroposophy, independently and together with others, become essential elements for the practice of Waldorf early childhood education. Through this work, we can come to experience that we are not alone on this journey.