

Gateways

Newsletter of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America ♦ Issue 89, Fall 2025

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285 Hungry Hollow Road

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(845) 352-1690 / Fax (845) 352-1695

info@waldorfearlychildhood.org

www.waldorfearlychildhood.org

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Editor *Nancy Blanning*

Co-Editor *Anjum Mir*

Editorial Advisor *Susan Howard*

Administrator *Melissa Lyons*

Copy Editing *Lory Widmer Hess*

Layout *Jennifer Siegrist/Calliope Creative*

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Lydia Tan is a preschool teacher at City of Lakes Waldorf School. She enjoys spending time in nature and discovering the unique treasures of each Minnesota season that are very different from the landscapes of her childhood in Thailand. This image is an artistic rendering she created during her Early Childhood training at Sunbridge Institute, where she explored the themes and elements of the seasons.

For the WECAN Calendar of Events, please visit waldorfearlychildhood.org/news-and-events/



WECAN

WALDORF EARLY CHILDHOOD
ASSOCIATION OF NORTH AMERICA



Mirá, mirá - las mariposas están llegando ... (see page 34). Photo courtesy of Saara Fahey

From the Editor

— Nancy Blanning

Is Waldorf early childhood education preparing our children for their future? This question keeps knocking at the door as we evaluate the past 100 years and prepare for the next. Recent and upcoming issues of *Gateways* are exploring the essentials for healthy incarnation in the first years, to prepare children for the practical, intellectual, and societal tasks ahead—for the whole of life. Among these essentials we can list:

- Guarding unhurried time to grow and mature so etheric growth forces can finish their work on the physical body
- Honoring the first seven years as a unique time in the human biography, when foundations for future capacities and skills are laid
- Surrounding the child with rich sensory experiences that lay the foundations for literacy and other cognitive activities while also protecting the senses from too much stimulation and exposure
- Attentively observing the child's physical growth, behavior, and interests to read developmental progress
- Allowing abundant time for imitation and play, while observing what the children say and do as messages indicating where they are on their incarnational path.

Readers will see all of these considered in a full and rich collection of articles in this issue of *Gateways*. Here is a preview of what you will find as you explore conceptual, pedagogical, and practical discussions reflecting on the essentials in Waldorf early childhood education.

The opening article is written by Michelle Gullage, who has experience as both a Waldorf early childhood and lower grades teacher. She looks at the question of literacy development from both sides. She has returned to working in early childhood as a deliberate choice. Her article tells why.

This is followed by an articulate detailing of how the Waldorf early years curriculum supports literacy development. Laura Cabral gives a clear outline of what we want to offer the children. She states: "The age-appropriate experiential curriculum is created to build pre-literacy skills by fostering the development

of the four foundational senses, the will forces, and imagination." It is upon these elements that future reading skills are founded.

Laurie Clark shares how children's drawings show a fascinating progression of steps in their development. The fruit of Laurie's long study devoted to children's drawings brings us some surprising and exciting new insight into how drawings help us "read" a child's steps of maturation.

"I'm bored!" is commonly seen as a call for "give me something new to do!" Ruth Ker offers a deep look at what this phrase indicates in moving toward school readiness. She explains that this is a sign of readying, not readiness.

Parents are nervous and anxious about their children being "behind" in keeping up with the rest of the world. Rie Seo shares a thoughtfully researched presentation the early childhood teachers at the Waldorf School of Garden City, NY presented to parents. Mainstream sources confirm that the foundational senses must be consolidated to build a strong neurological base for future cognitive tasks. The Pyramid of Learning shows this graphically. This presentation can be a valuable adult education resource for our schools.

Going back to our essentials, we can ask, what about play? How does that prepare children for their future? An excerpt from Sharifa Oppenheimer's work gives a secure answer to that question.

The literacy curriculum from Apple Blossom preschool gives us an outline of how literacy is developed through the rich exposure children have to oral speech. The story telling, circle imaginations, puppetry, rhymes and verses are powerful building blocks toward literacy. Thank you to Allison Reznik for sharing this piece.

Eurythmy also supports literacy, as explained by long-time eurythmist, Alice Stamm. The connection of speech sounding with gesture is powerful. Alice's explanation makes us feel fortunate to have eurythmy in the early childhood classes.

Jerlyn Burke helps to celebrate the contribution and value of nursery rhymes in her short article. Fun

sounds, amusing images, rhythm, and playful speech all come together in these rhymes. These little ditties awaken the ear to sound discrimination and invite interested listening.

Aimee de Ney sees the importance and power of helping children become friends and allies with the natural world. Learning names of plants and animals builds relationship between human beings and all of the natural world. Knowing names and using them respectfully open the door to friendship with the “beings of the Lands,” a gift Aimee strives to give to children.

Janene Ping’s article on building literacy in non-academic ways rounds out this opening section. How we speak clearly, emphasizing the rhythm of the word with its distinct sounds educates phonemic awareness, letter discrimination, and word segmenting. All of these are necessary precursors to academic literacy. Children deserve time to be immersed in these experiences.

For the Classroom has new material to bring fresh sounds, and imagination this school year. Debora Petschek shares a story to bring Martin Luther King, Jr. and his legacy appropriately to young children. This imagination of the shepherd and his sheep is truthful and sweet without being either too explicit or sentimental.

Three circles are here as well. Saara Fahey presents a circle to bridge Dia de Los Muertos to Lantern time with images of the butterfly in its transformation. Beautiful pictures show how she represents this on her seasonal table.

Sarah Mortenson Gauss presents a tomten story, which has grown out of her love with Scandinavia and its folk lore. The circle movements include some American Sign Language (ASL) Sarah included for a hearing impaired child in her class. This circle is delightfully fun and active.

A winter Valentine circle brings something new with the “rumbly, bumbly bellies” of the King and Queen of Hearts. Tasty language and amusing

happenings mark this circle. Thank you, Laura Esposito, for contributing this.

Looking to the classroom in a different way, Cordula Hetland shares her love for making “the little ones” and enlivening them with the class children. If you have not tried these or want to freshen up relationship with the Littles, this article is for you. The accompanying photos are beautiful.

Finally, for our personal self-development and our relation to words and communication, Stephanie Hoelscher shares “Five Good Words” to help us consider our relationship with the power of words.

Book reviews

Three new WECAN publications are featured. Please note *Speech Development in the Digital Age* for a start. This dovetails in with our reflections on the literacy question.

Mentoring and Professional Evaluation in Waldorf Early Childhood in its updated and revised edition is an essential guide book for schools, mentors, and evaluators. It can also be a helpful tool for individual teacher’s own self-evaluation. Reflection and review of our own professional, pedagogical, and personal growth and development is an essential for Waldorf educators, too.

The long awaited first volume of *Free Movement from the Very Start* is now available. This thorough consideration of understanding and supporting healthy incarnation from birth to age three is a huge work. Jane Swain’s study, research, and examples from her work as physical therapist, movement specialist, and grandmother are unequalled in other publications. The book is a treasure chest.

This issue concludes with what could have been the leading article or, as placed here, the epilogue to this lofty and vast consideration of health in body, soul, and spirit for the whole of life. We have found Heike Adamsberger’s contemplation and celebration of this special time quite moving. May you find inspiration from it too. ♦

—Nancy Blanning

INVITATION FOR SUBMISSIONS

for *Gateways* ISSUE 90 SPRING 2026

THE FOUNDATIONS OF LITERACY—*Part II* and TAKING TIME

The centenary of the official founding of Waldorf early childhood education invites us to identify the principles and practices that have served children well, and what guiding principles are essential to carry into the future. One essential is that we help children strengthen the foundational capacities to build the academic skills their futures will require.

The fall *Gateways* focuses upon **how the Waldorf experiential and imagination-filled curriculum prepares the pathway toward literacy**. The children's days and weeks build this capacity through movement and oral speech, singing, stories, puppetry, circle imaginations, practical human work, and play. The children show us that their development **takes time** to ripen.

There is much to consider and investigate to reveal the power of these practices, so the spring issue will expand upon the theme of **literacy development and the wisdom of allowing children time to consolidate their readiness**. **We want to further build our repertoire of language-rich and movement-rich imaginations that prepare our children for their future challenges, tasks, and joys in human life.**

Please send:

- Rhymes, transitional verses and ditties, movement imaginations, stories, puppet vignettes, songs, and hand-gesture games
- Examples of how these have been brought to a class with happy satisfaction
- Examples of practical work that meet the various ages, woven throughout the daily, weekly, and yearly rhythms and
- Examples to share regarding the value of **taking time** in the rhythm of the school day, week, and year, and in observing a child's developmental readiness for new tasks and challenges.

Please include a short bio of yourself, including your location and the age-group you work with, and anything else that is relevant in giving context to your submission (5-6 sentences). Please send submissions by Word document. Short contributions range from 500-700 words. Average articles are up to 1500 words. The maximum for serious considerations of a topic is 3000 words. 12 pt font with clear paragraph divisions is requested.

PLEASE SEND SUBMISSIONS TO gatewayscollection@gmail.com BY JANUARY 10, 2026

For clarification and discussion about submission ideas, please send your question to gatewayscollection@gmail.com.



Focus—*The Foundations of Literacy*

Planting Seeds of Learning in Early Childhood

~ Michelle Gullage

In the Waldorf early childhood classroom, the seeds of what comes later in academic learning are planted long before formal instruction begins. These years are devoted to play, movement, imitation, and relationship—with nature, with one another, and with the world itself. Language development emerges not through direct teaching, but through rich experiences that shape the child's body, imagination, and sense of belonging.

The young child experiences the world with openness and trust. Rudolf Steiner identifies this as the natural orientation of the young child, describing how until about the age of seven, children live in a receptive state where they perceive the world as fundamentally good. This state is temporary; the doorway gradually closes as the child approaches nine years old. In this precious window of time, early childhood teachers work primarily with the will, modeling gestures, speech, and qualities of being that children naturally imitate. To introduce academic instruction too early risks cutting short this formative period, depriving children of the chance to root themselves in the love of language, in their bodies, and in their relationship with the world.

Play in these years is not a diversion but a foundation. Through play—and even through the necessary experiences of boredom as they approach six and seven—children deepen their capacities for observation, perspective, and wonder. What a critical juncture this is in their development!

The importance of holding off formal academics until around age seven is supported not only by Steiner's pedagogical insights but also by contemporary research. A Stanford-led study reported in *The Washington Post* found that delaying kindergarten by one year led to “a reduction in inattention and hyperactivity by 73 percent for an average child

at age 11, and virtually eliminated the probability that an average child would have an ‘abnormal,’ or higher-than-normal rating” for such behaviors. This underscores the developmental value of allowing children the time and space for play, wonder, and gradual awakening to the world.

Steiner emphasizes that imagination and creativity, awakened through play, are essential forces for later intellectual life. Likewise, time in nature provides lessons of immeasurable value: patience, rhythm, curiosity, and a sense of interconnection. In the early childhood years, what children need most is not academic content, but the freedom to gradually awaken to the world around them.

This becomes even more crucial when we consider children who face developmental obstacles. For children with anxiety, sensory processing differences, ADHD, or autism, early childhood offers a vital opportunity to strengthen their sense of self and belonging in their own bodies. To press such children prematurely into abstract academics can be counterproductive, even harmful. Too often, remedial work later becomes necessary for those who were hurried past this stage before they were ready. Steiner himself warned of the dangers of over-intellectualization too early in life, noting that education must unfold in harmony with the child's physical and soul development.

In my own experience of working in mixed-age kindergarten up through third grade, I have noticed this: children who arrive from conventional early schooling or lower grades often lack the bodily awareness and confidence of their Waldorf-educated peers, and often lack the ability to easily access their imaginations in free play with peers. This raises an urgent question for us as educators: how do we help parents truly understand the importance of providing

this foundation for the children? What does readiness for first grade really look like, and how are we effectively communicating this? How do we preserve the integrity of childhood in a culture that increasingly seeks to accelerate it?

The answer surely does not lie in earlier academics, but rather in slowing down the acceleration and holding space for childhood itself—an antithesis to the pressures of our age. By honoring play, nurturing imagination, and cultivating a child's deep relationship with language and the natural world, we provide the truest foundation for intellectual and academic growth.

This is what first pulled me to the Waldorf early childhood classroom some sixteen years ago—being able to provide a foundation from which a child can continuously harvest in the years ahead—and what has brought me back again after three years in the lower grades. The tender holding of this stage of development is too precious to let slip past us. Attempting to give a set form to something not yet ready is very much like stamping down soil over a just-planted seed, which needs air to circulate in order to germinate.

Early childhood is a time to plant seeds of curiosity and wonder, so that when the intellect does awaken,

it can unfold upon ground that is steady, confident, and whole.

We have to find ways to continue to remember this and hope that all of us become passionately enlivened in the work that we have before us. ♦

Recommended Resources

- Steiner, Rudolf. *The Education of the Child in the Light of Anthroposophy*
- Steiner, Rudolf. *Practical Advice to Teachers*
- Steiner, Rudolf. *The Kingdom of Childhood*

The study referred to was reported in an article by Valerie Strauss, "Delaying kindergarten until age 7 offers key benefits to kids: study." *The Washington Post*. October 7, 2015.

Michelle Gullage is in her twenty-fourth year of teaching, with fifteen of those years in Waldorf kindergartens. Since 2017, she has been part of the Orchard Valley Waldorf School community in East Montpelier, Vermont, where she brings warmth, flexibility, and a deep love of the outdoors to her work with children.

A Strong Foundation

~ Laura Marina Cabral

The foundations of literacy begin before birth. While in the uterus, the fetus learns to recognize voices, at first their mother's, and then voices of people around them. Although the auditive system develops earlier, at around 27 to 29 weeks of gestation, the fetus begins to recognize language from outside the womb and to differentiate it from other noises. During the second trimester of gestation, the fetus can recognize and respond to language. Researchers believe reading aloud to a fetus supports their brain development and fosters early literacy skills.

It is important that after birth, children are provided with an environment in which they can learn and develop in a holistic way. Waldorf education is one of the few teaching models that promote early literacy and build pre-academic skills during the first seven years, while honoring the age and stage of development of the young child. The multi-sensory Waldorf early childhood curriculum is designed to meet the young child in a play-based environment that nurtures cognitive skills for a successful academic journey in the grades. The age-appropriate

experiential curriculum builds pre-literacy skills by fostering the development of the four foundational senses, the will forces, and imagination.

Traditional early childhood programs overlook the importance of playful and meaningful environments that foster the development of the foundational senses. The Waldorf early childhood curriculum is designed to provide young children with experiential learning that promotes creativity and independent thinking. Nurtured through free play and movement, the four foundational senses of touch, life, movement, and balance help children build the pre-literacy skills that are crucial to readiness for literacy and success in academic life. Before they are exposed to formal academic work, young children must successfully integrate and take hold of their physical body.

A healthy development of the child's will forces is a core value of Waldorf early childhood education. Waldorf early childhood teachers are committed to offering and implementing a developmentally appropriate curriculum that supports the child's will forces, by integrating practical work like gardening, cleaning, and cooking in their daily rhythms, as well as by engaging children in rhythmic circles with therapeutic movement, songs, and verse. The rhythm, repetition, and richness of the language offered throughout a child's journey in the early childhood program help solidify brain synapses, building cognitive skills for academic learning. A rich curriculum fosters curiosity, inspires creativity, and develops new capacities. Experiential learning is the most effective method to support the development of the will forces, and it is through a healthy development of the will that the hearts and minds of young children can be successfully reached and nurtured.

In the Waldorf early childhood setting, imagination is a magical force that is treasured as an essential element in thought and cognition. The play-based curriculum is created to nourish the child's imagination. Play materials are made of natural fibers that promote a genuine connection with nature, and open-ended toys promote the child's creativity.

The daily seasonal circle and story times not only help children connect with their environment and peers, but also stimulate mental pictures and support speech development, which are critical for academic success. The Waldorf curriculum also supports the development of social skills, which allow students to imagine, create, negotiate, and to develop their sense of industry. Through play, children can joyfully learn while building pre-academic and real-life skills. Play is their work and work is their play.

For a successful literacy journey, young children must be nurtured in all the four foundational senses, as well as in their souls and spirits. They must be given the opportunity to develop at their own pace with a teaching method that honors and supports their stage of development. Waldorf education cherishes the precious gifts of early childhood and honors each child's individuality; this method is focused on individual and group success. Waldorf early childhood educators are committed to being role models worthy of imitation, supporting young children to integrate successfully in their physical bodies while building pre-literacy skills.

The environment in the Waldorf early childhood classroom is thoughtfully created to offer a peaceful, inspiring, and soothing atmosphere where children can feel at home. In this environment young children are not rushed to learn academics, but rather are invited to play, explore, imagine, experience, and create. In Waldorf early childhood education, children are not only supported to develop from their inside out and prepared for academic success in the grades, but are also supported in the unfolding of their destiny. ♦

Laura Marina Cabral has been working in both Waldorf and mainstream early childhood settings for the past 21 years. The last fourteen of these have been at the Pasadena Waldorf Waldorfschool, where she is site director and also lead teacher in the Poppy Preschool class.

From Chrysalis to Butterfly

The Development of Children's Drawings

~ Laurie Clark

After overhearing a conversation with his older brother, my little grandson said to me, "Did you know that your brain is on both sides of your head?" I replied, "How do you know that?" He confidently answered, "My angel helped build me, that's how I knowed."

Over five decades as a Waldorf teacher, one of the many things the children have taught me is the marvel of how they portray themselves through their drawings in the first seven years of life. My interest has grown ever wider as I carefully observe and gather drawings from the children in my care and study Rudolf Steiner's insights on child development. Children's phases of development are mirrored in their astonishing drawings, as Audrey McAllen indicates in her book *Reading Children's Drawings*. She describes how, through focused observation, the teacher can "decipher what the angel consciousness of the [young child's] individuality is trying to tell them." What my little grandson said about the "angel helping to build him" was a precise description of how he "knowed."

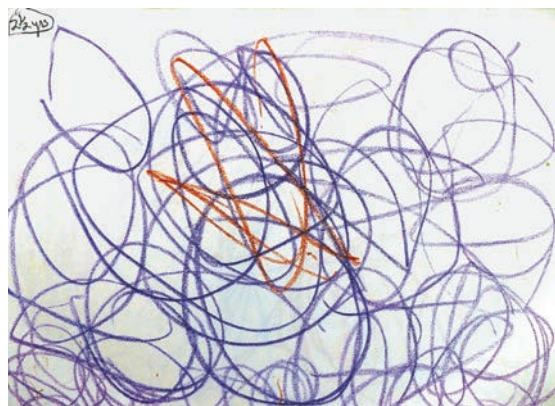
Children's drawings from all over the world have something in common. Specific age groups of children in the first seven years draw similar representations of their physical body. What a wonder! The drawings can be seen with our eyes, but there is more to it. There are invisible spiritual forces at work, which the child expresses in drawing the same shapes, sometimes over and over again.

There are many things in the world that are real, though invisible to our physical eyes. When we plant a seed in the ground, there is a flower that will grow from it, though it cannot yet be seen. If we are lucky, we may see a butterfly, but what transforms the caterpillar inside the cocoon into the beautiful creature is invisible to us. When a woman is pregnant and carries a becoming child under her heart, we wonder what that child may look like, but cannot yet behold the answer. What is the force that makes the gigantic waves crash on the shores of the ocean? The love we feel for someone is not perceptible in a material form; it is a feeling that can be expressed but not physically perceived. Our life is full of mysterious, invisible forces.

Rudolf Steiner offers insight into these invisible forces, which invite the soul and spirit to integrate through specific developmental phases for the child. In *The Spiritual Guidance of the Individual and Humanity* Steiner describes the invisible forces that are gifted to the child from the spiritual world during the first three years of life.

In the first three years, Steiner tells us, we are still in direct contact with the higher worlds. Forces from the spiritual world stream into the child directionally from below to above. In the first year of life, with the wisest of guidance, spirit helpers bestow the capacities to come into uprightness. The child begins to walk and find their way into the world. Around two years old, the child begins speaking and can communicate as a social being. Somewhere between two and three years old, there comes a moment when each child can identify as an individual, saying "I" instead of using their name. From living in the consciousness of total oneness with the world, the child moves toward the experience, "This 'I' is me, I am my own self separate from everyone else." With this individualized development, the first seeds of waking up in thinking begins. These spiritual forces stream from the feet (walking) to the larynx (speaking) all the way to the head (thinking), giving an orientation into the earthly life. In adulthood, when we work with spiritual ideals, these same powerful spiritual powers generate creativity and become healing forces for the injuries life brings to us.

At the same time as these forces are streaming from below to above in the first three years, there are invisible spiritual powers that draw into the physical body from the opposite direction, from above to below. These etheric vital forces do their work in the first seven years of life in a formative way, building and sculpting, transforming the inherited body of the child and individualizing it. The etheric body provides the child's physical body with the nourishing life forces it needs to grow in a healthy way. Being respectful to these forces that are imperceptibly working in the child will sustain them. Adults can give the child the gift of time that is needed to complete this process.



Spiraling. Around age 1-2



The circle closes. Between ages 2 and 3



Lines emerge. Around age 2-3

This formative life stream can become visible to us, from the head all the way to the toes, when we observe the way children draw. Step by developmental step, their drawings show us where they are in their consciousness and how they perceive their body. The drawings in this article are pictures from the children I have had the fortune to care for.

Observing a child's drawings as an adult requires a certain reverence. We would never judge, jump to conclusions about, or diagnose a child by these drawings. I would suggest taking the good advice from the Irish poet, John O'Donohue; "What you encounter, recognize or discover depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach... When we approach with reverence, great things decide to approach us." When observing the child's drawings in this way, over time, they begin to speak to us, and we begin to hear what they are telling us.

It is quite common that the earliest forms the child draws are recapitulated again and again in the first seven years of life. A five- or six-year-old child may fill the page with circles or other forms that they drew at an earlier stage of development. All of the ages that I describe in the developmental drawings are approximate, and there are always exceptions.

I can only briefly describe these various stages that portray the child's consciousness and how the formative forces move through the physical body, fashioning it into its own individuality. In this article, I am focusing on how children draw themselves. Pictures of a tree and a house similarly reveal developmental stages, but are not included in this article as there is just not enough room in this journal to include them.

When children can pick up a writing tool in the first year or two of life, they often begin to draw large spiraling circles that have no beginning and no end; they are drawn spontaneously. Often this spiraling movement looks as though it is carrying the hand and arm of the child, as they keep drawing it even when not looking at the paper. The very young child is swept up into the movement, there is no separating yet; all is in oneness. There is a living drive and rhythm that carries children in these spiraling motions. Their awareness is still very connected to the spirit world that have just recently come from; the young child is a total sense organ. Every sense impression enters into them, and they fully take it in, with no filters yet. These never-ending spirals are a picture of the consciousness of the children, their first self-portraits.

When children are between two and three years old, something new arises in their drawing. The formative forces are coming down from above into the region of the head. From out of the never-ending spiraling movement appears a closed circle; a stopping point is found. The child will often draw the circle over and over again with great effort. It is a remarkable thing to observe how much determination the children use to draw this new form. Something compels them to keep closing the circle, sometimes filling up whole pages with circles. What is the child trying to tell us? The circle is not spiraling anymore; it is closed. This is often when the child begins to say "I." The circle says: "This is me, and everything else is not me." Saying "no" to almost everything one asks of them is healthy at this stage. It is as if they were telling us, "This circle is my separate self, I have a boundary now that I am trying out and practicing, so, 'No!'"



The square trunk. Around age 4-6



Triangular forms. Around age 6-7



The full body. Around age 7

Around the ages of two to three years old, the children's drawings of the circle develop lines coming out of them. The lines often start from inside the circle, and like little "sensory feelers" reach out of the self (the circle) into the world, hovering in space on the paper. These are the earliest drawings of head/limb people. The first awakening awareness of the limbs is shown, coming out of the head form, which sometimes has facial features. The formative forces are in the head, but children are also becoming aware of their arms and legs reaching out like the rays of the sun. Often the eyes are drawn as large circles, as if to tell us the children are taking in all the impressions of life deeply in, drinking in the world and then imitating what they have experienced.

The formative forces make their way down into the body around the age of four to six. Now the child may begin to draw the trunk in a square shape, as the formative forces graciously do their work in the middle realm of the chest. The head has a square form under it, and stick figures with arms and legs appear. Strong feelings are expressed by the child, as they open more consciously in the heart realm. As consciousness awakens in the four- to five-year-old child, the fingers may be drawn as long, long lines that reach out into the world around them. The fingers, too, are "waking up" and yearning to become active. Finger knitting, sewing, hand gesture games and other such activities are very satisfying.

Somewhere between six-and-a-half to seven years old, the child draws a triangular form. The symbol of the triangle carries profound meanings in various cultures and religions. The triangle's point reaches upward to the heavens, and the straight line on the

bottom is parallel to the earth. The drawing of the triangle is most often seen below the chest area. The formative forces now enter the metabolic region. Christhilde Blume, in her book *Young Children's Drawings As a Mirror of Development*, tells us that there is an inverted triangle in the cross-section of the colon. The triangle is also found in some of our bones, such as the shoulder blade. The spiritual formative powers have penetrated all the way into the bones, as well as all the way to the periphery of the body, the hands and feet. Again, it is remarkable to see drawings that the children are making at various stages as they become aware and draw where the formative forces are working.

Around seven years of age, the figure the child draws is on the ground, not in space; it is in gravity. This can be seen in the drawings that show the completed figure of the body. The strong, playful fantasy that was so available to the child now retreats. This is also the time when the teeth are falling out and the empty space in their mouth waits for something new. The children are ready for a new adventure in their life, once the etheric formative powers have finished this part of their task; they have individualized the physical body from the model body given by the parents. With health and full potential, the child is ready for academic learning.

These archetypal developmental forms in children's drawings are similar to each other in most parts of the world. Though there is a sequential manifestation of forms, in connection with the age of the child, some will draw certain forms earlier, others much later. Some children may not draw them at all for various reasons, though this is quite rare. Leaving all possibilities open without diagnosing is essential.

Drawings are a piece of the puzzle of development, not the whole picture. However, the more one observes children's drawings, one begins to see patterns of development. These drawings can be a helpful tool to understand the child.

In *The Education of the Child*, Rudolf Steiner describes that just as the physical body of the mother surrounds the unborn child enveloping and protecting it inside her as it develops, so it is that until about the seventh year, the child is surrounded by a second protective envelope, like an invisible kind of womb. Children's drawings show how the formative vital forces unfold and develop, from the drawings of the head all the way to the full schemata of the body, down to the feet. The mother carries the child inside her for nine months. The etheric forces transform the physical body in the first seven years of life.

The child's etheric envelope of protection in the first seven years of life is very much like the chrysalis that cradles the caterpillar, the becoming butterfly. When the time is just right and the transformation is taking place, the butterfly slowly pushes against the shell of the chrysalis with its legs and head and comes out with crumpled wings. It is well known that if a person, with all good intentions, tries to help a butterfly unfold its crumpled wings, it will not live. It takes time for the butterflies, with great effort, to use strengthening movements of their own as they pump a fluid into their wings and stretch them for a few hours before they can fly.

So it is with the protective, etheric envelope of the child in the first seven years of life. The hatching out of the etheric envelope and the transformation that the child developmentally experiences needs patience and understanding; it is a gradual process. A child's development cannot be accelerated or hurried in any way. Giving the child this opportunity is a winged gift. ♦

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*With over four decades of Waldorf early childhood teaching, **Laurie Clark** is a teacher trainer, author, workshop and conference presenter, and mentor. With Nancy Blanning, she co-authored Movement Journeys and Circle Adventures, vol. 1 and 2. Laurie presently enjoys assisting her daughter in a home program for two-to-four-year-olds.*

What does “I’m bored” really mean?

~ Ruth Ker

As I write this, my granddaughter, Elanor, is sitting across from me, doing her fork knitting. “It stretches from the front door to the back door,” she tells me. Recently, she proclaimed to her parents, “I don’t want you to tell me what to do. I know what I want to do all by myself.” In my estimation, this six-and-a-half-year-old expression sounds an awful lot like “You’re not the Boss of Me”!

Observing Elanor has given me ample opportunity to confirm the validity of ten years of research with two different first grade readiness research groups, concentrating on the older child in the kindergarten and the age-span between five-and-a-half and seven. This period of life is very challenging for young children, a time when they are engaging with a second birth process, transforming on all levels. Having time to consolidate this vast make-over of the physical, emotional, social, and consciousness realms is a health-giving key which influences the whole rest of the young child’s life. Can we give our children this blessed gift of time?

My granddaughter is currently providing me another opportunity to learn about this transition. Elanor had developed strong capacities, and was due to turn six in December of her first year of school. Her parents contemplated long and hard about whether they would send her to kindergarten or to first grade. Both parents are teachers in public sector schools, and, after much research and pondering, they decided to send Elanor to kindergarten in the local Waldorf school. During this past year, she has gone through the usual body metamorphosis that happens during the birth of the formative forces—the second birth referred to above, also called the birth of the etheric, the birth of the life forces, second dentition, and the change-of-teeth. Elanor has stretched up in height, extended in her limbs, developed an arch in her back and her feet, had her rib cage tilt forward, and lost ample baby fat. The bony part of her body has become more obvious (knuckles, neck, wrists, knee caps, ankles), and she also has lost some of her baby teeth and is welcoming some new shiny adult teeth. And these are only the physical changes!

She’s also adapting to a variety of new friends in her world, learning how to play co-operatively and

developing in her ability to tolerate change, and is burgeoning with imaginative pictures. However, most intriguing are the changes in consciousness that have arisen. Her ability to have recall memory, independent of clues that trigger memory, is strengthening. Planning and causal thinking and a sense of time (if I do this, what will happen next) are more operative.

At the Waldorf school, she has had a glorious year of play and has taken a deep interest in the ample opportunities through circle, story, pretending stories, and conversation with friends and teachers to deepen her literacy skills and develop on all levels. She loves the fairy tales and the stories her Dad tells her. During play, she has made many signs, and many words are accumulating in her vocabulary. None of these acquisitions have come through instructional learning, but rather through imitation. Her parents show her letters when she asks. There is often a long wait in between requests for this information. Generally, she prefers to draw pictures representative of what she’s seeing in her mind’s eye. Recently, as well as playing animals, cooking, house-cleaning, doll dressing, fairies, and dancing, she loves to work in the garden and play school. She has a repertoire of five to eight words that make their way into all kinds of drawings and paintings.

Reflecting back to my time in the classroom, I remember the kindergarten children’s interest when I printed their names on their drawings, paintings and projects. Soon they would find a way to imitate this behavior, taking pleasure in playing at making their own signs, books with random letters, and notes to be delivered to other children’s houses. One sign was used in our classroom for weeks, a child’s version of OPEN. It read “NOPE.”

I’m reminded of an excerpt from Rudolf Steiner in *The Education of the Child*, where he speaks of children playing and making signs. This excerpt has been quoted a lot lately by those who are encouraging early kindergarten literacy training, a practice I do not favor myself. Unfortunately, the quote is not often given in its entirety. Reading the whole of the quote will help us to see that early explicit literacy training in early childhood before the consolidation of the birth of the etheric is not advised by Rudolf Steiner:

“Children who live in such an atmosphere of love and warmth and who have around them really good examples for imitating, are living in the right element. One should therefore strictly guard against anything being done in children’s presence that they must not imitate. One should do nothing of which one would then have to say to the child, ‘You must not do that.’ The strength of the child’s tendency to imitate can be recognized by observing how the child will paint and scribble written signs and letters long before they are understood. Indeed, it is good for the child to paint the letters by imitation first, and only later learn to understand their meaning. For imitation belongs to this period when the physical body is developing; while the meaning speaks to the etheric, and the etheric body should not be worked on till after the change of teeth, when the outer etheric envelope has fallen away. Especially, should all learning of speech in these years be through imitation. It is by hearing that the children will best learn to speak. No rules or artificial instruction of any kind can be of good effect.”

In the kindergarten, our aim is to provide worthy models for imitation, supporting the birth of the etheric, after which it will be time to engage with instructional content in the grades. In terms of literacy, Waldorf kindergartens weave together rich tapestries of oral tradition with stories, games, and circles. These carefully-chosen literary gems respond to the child’s need for repetitive deepening and orality, but also, when told or played out slowly in a child-digestible way, teach syntax, structure, and word order. They respond to the picture imaginations flooding the child’s mind’s eye and awaken a love for language, both much needed capacities for future enjoyment of reading.

The foremost thing to remember is that children between five-and-a-half and seven are still in the participating consciousness stage of life. They are interested in joining in with what those in their environment are doing, rather than preoccupied with what they are saying, so accompanying stories and circles with gestures is compelling for them. The variety of modalities encompassed in the Waldorf early childhood approach to orality and literacy serve the needs of many learning styles, through conversation, puppetry, pretending the story, imitation of the written word, picture imaginations created from oral presentation, movement and singing games, just to name a few. A wide variety of

sensory experiences are offered, among them visual, auditory and tactile explorations.

In the Waldorf early childhood environment, literacy is approached by offering heuristic learning, which means enabling someone to discover or learn something for themselves. This type of learning strengthens children’s belief in their own capacities and builds a strong foundation of knowledge required to later learn the nuances of the written language. Phonological awareness develops through repetition of rhymes, songs, and riddles, where children are encouraged to play with sounds and explore language.

Literacy is intertwined with other experiences, too. Accompanying our speech with three-dimensional presentations (while working with bread dough, for instance), and also drawing, handwork, and painting are compelling for the children. Children can also be given the opportunity to express knowledge, sharing narratives and ideas, during structured and unstructured times of the day. They benefit greatly by having the adults in their lives respond to their ideas by helping them manifest their plans.

We Waldorf early childhood educators can deepen our understanding of what it is like for the older child in the kindergarten by looking for what Freya Jaffke has described as the “crisis of will and imagination.” This is the time when children start to have a plan for what they want to happen that day, rather than entering spontaneously into play upon coming into the early childhood environment. It can be a confusing time for the children, who up to this point have easily united their own will with the play of others, often driven by an outer stimulus. Now, the stimulus is beginning to come from within in the form of picture imaginations and ideas. At this transition, behaviors like hesitating to enter into play, watching from the outside, and expressing boredom can be disconcerting for adults. It’s crucial for children to be given the opportunity to dwell in this state of consciousness in order to reap the benefits of engaging with evolving capacities within themselves.

This is, however, a time also when the older child in the kindergarten needs to be met with a rich, full curriculum. This includes regular experiences of stories deep in meaning, games where the children can build on their ability to practice “the rules of the land,” interesting circles that take up their imaginations, and educators who listen to them and are able to incorporate their wonderings. These engagements can

help the older child in the kindergarten to transition through the birth of the etheric with more grace.

As early childhood educators, we may experience pressure from parents' preferences for their child's individual needs, administrators who need to accommodate local mainstream expectations, and grade school colleagues, who may all want us to be more explicit and instructional. However, the greatest challenge arises when the young child expresses, "I'm bored." This is a statement that can elicit panic from adults. It is often misinterpreted, and then children are in danger of being inundated with all kinds of academic offerings that can take them away from solving the challenge of learning to play in a way that incorporates their newfound consciousness and their ability to plan and strategize. The older children in the kindergarten will often suggest ideas for circle content or play challenges. As mentioned above, listening and trying to incorporate their suggestions is a way to work dynamically with them.

Many children have given me valuable insights into this consciousness shift. Often these children would arrive at the kindergarten gate on particular mornings, after many months of diving into fantasy play, and suddenly did not know what to do. This was often followed by a period of watching from the periphery, and then, after focusing on some compelling game that others were playing, jumping into the midst of the play. I'm thinking in particular about Kelly, a single child from an artistic and expressive family, who told her parents one day on the way to school, "Mom, everything looks different. You look different and Dad too and even Harlequin, the cat, is different. And, Mom, I don't know how to play."

When the children experience such a "crisis of will and imagination" they will often say, "I'm bored." Another way to express this crisis might be: "How do I get people to join me when I plan my play, instead of just spontaneously playing?" Or, "Everything is changing and how do I find my way?" They need time to adapt to a new way of being.

In summary, deeply understanding the changes the older children in the kindergarten are experiencing will help us, as educators, to empathize with their journey through their second birth. We can then draw on the natural impulses of the child to imitate others and explore their environment. It's up to us as adults, whether parents or teachers, to give our children the rich opportunity and grace to explore their world

in a way that draws on what is streaming naturally through, them rather than pre-empting their heuristic learning with conceptual learning too early. This could mean preparing ourselves, as educators, to advocate for the older children in the kindergarten so that they can transition through their second birth without academic coaching before going into first grade.

As I write this, Elanor is over six-and-a-half years old. She just lost her fifth tooth and has grown two more inches so far this summer. Perhaps one of the most exciting and significant parts of the metamorphosis she has gone through is that she has fully engaged with recall memory. This means that she will be able to remember the story in first grade the day after it is told for the first time. She will have the experience of being able to respond accurately to her teacher's memory prompts.

I am often concerned about children who go into first grade before completing the birth of the etheric. For months, they can be living in a confusing state of change, before recall memory and other capacities arrive. I was such a child myself, and remember the impact it had on my own self-confidence and sense of social belonging.

Our children have many challenges to surmount and joyful experiences to have in their sacred journey in the Waldorf grade school. It is my hope that we can continue to help them to make this transition fortified with a healthy readiness. ♦

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Ruth Ker has been an early childhood educator in preschools and kindergartens for over forty years, first in mainstream education and then at Sunrise Waldorf School in BC, Canada where she was a founding teacher. Now a mentor and teacher trainer, she is the author/editor of the books, *You're Not the Boss of Me – Understanding the Six/Seven Year Transformation, From Kindergarten into the Grades*, and *Please, Can We Play Games?*, all available from WECAN.

Play Supports Language Development and Literacy

~ Sharifa Oppenheimer

Excerpted from *With Stars in Their Eyes: Brain Science and Your Child's Journey Toward the Self* (SteinerBooks, 2019)

Similar to the way movement scaffolds for language acquisition, play scaffolds for literacy development.¹ Play supports children's emerging language ability, as they talk to themselves and their playmates during social pretend play. Their language continues to develop through the desire to express ever more complex imaginative ideas. These two threads, the ability to construct inner images—imagination—and the capacity to express these in language, work synchronistically; each encourages the growth of the other. The verbal exchanges and their symbolic meanings between three-year-olds at play differ dramatically from six-year-olds at play. Three-year-olds typically play out scenarios from their own day, like grocery shopping or getting ready for a nap. They are beginning to explore symbolic play, as they examine a block to check the grocery list or lay out a towel as their bed. At six years, this play has expanded to include travels to far-away lands. Dining chairs become a difficult mountain trail, toilet paper tubes and string are walkie-talkies that connect the mountaineers, the couch is base-camp. As the child's hands are busy building these richly imagined scenarios, the frontal lobes of the brain are activated for creativity and high-level reasoning!

This symbolic play and the language it involves share common capacities with the ability to read and write. Play and literacy both require the ability to use objects, mental images and words to represent other objects or events. "We can view the process of development of written language as one which leads from oral language through symbolic play to written language"² Our children begin to acquire language in simple ways; they know the language for a bowl and spoon. A short while later, as they develop symbolic thought, they will pick up a walnut shell, see the similarity, and say, "This is a bowl for my baby doll." Several busy-at-play years later than this, they will draw a picture and label it "The mother is feeding her baby from a bowl." Symbolic play, which uses mental images and complex oral language, becomes written language.³

Play also offers an open space for the child to assimilate and make meaning of experience. At play they create and understand the symbolic meaning of objects. This lays a foundation for the ability to understand the symbolic meaning of letters and written words. It is during play that these substructures for literacy are laid down in the most engaging way. As they play, children practice mental processes similar to reading and writing. When adequate play-time is lost, and the process of abstracting meaning from symbols is taught in a direct-instructional mode, the child loses inner creativity, and with it, joy. Research indicates that children can learn significantly faster, potentially 20 times more quickly, when engaged in play, compared to other learning methods.⁴ This is because play facilitates the rapid creation of new neural connections in the brain. For example, it may take 400 repetitions to create a new synapse through traditional learning, but only 10-20 repetitions through play.⁵ Let us encourage the joy of the creative process, as well as the ease of acquiring literacy, when we make plenty of time and space for play.

Play Transforms into Thought

When children can create, hold and mold inner images, they have a fine foundation for learning written language, for it depends entirely upon these skills. When the child can see, hold, and transform in their mind the inner pictures involved in play, they are then ready for the symbolic letters of a written language.⁶ They can now grasp how the letters remain the same yet are interchangeable, as new words are formed. Over time they have developed an extensive vocabulary and are practiced in using words to create inner images. We can think of this as second-order symbolic thought; using the symbolic forms of language to create the symbolic forms of inner images.

It is not wise to push this process, with the goal of early reading. We lay the finest foundation for reading by using language well ourselves: speaking in full sentences, articulating fully, and reading engaging age-appropriate stories to our children. When we

model this fine use of language and offer plenty of story elements, our children take these into their play, where they practice literacy skills. During this time the brain is slowly developing and growing the various regions necessary for reading written language. Importantly, it is at about the age of seven that these areas of the brain have become connected together neurally and are well-myelinated. Myelin is a fatty sheath that acts like pavement on a highway or a superconductor. It allows the neurotransmitters to flow more quickly and easily. When we ask young children under the age of seven to learn to read, it is as though we have asked them to take a weedy, overgrown back road, rather than a smooth highway. If we wait a few short years that are filled with fine language, stories, and play, their highway to reading will be complete.⁷ ♦

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Sharifa Oppenheimer was the founding teacher of the Charlottesville Waldorf School as well as *The Rose Garden*, a Waldorf early childhood home-program. She is the author of *Heaven on Earth: A Handbook for Parents of Young Children and its companion workbook How To Create The Star of your Family Culture*, as well as *With Stars in Their Eyes*. Her research is devoted to exploring the ways in which the latest findings in brain science support Steiner principles. For more news and information, visit sharifaoppenheimer.org.

Understanding School Readiness Through the Pyramid of Learning

~ Rie Seo

In Waldorf early childhood education, we place great importance on the first seven years of life as a sacred and formative time. It is during these years that the groundwork for lifelong learning and well-being is laid. We observe daily how each child's physical, sensory, emotional, and social development unfolds uniquely, yet follows a universal rhythm.

At the Waldorf School of Garden City, we have established a tradition of organizing an annual family evening that focuses on the development of readiness for first grade during the early childhood years. Over time, we have explored various approaches to share what we consider to be a crucial unfolding process in a child's educational journey.

In our discussions this year, we introduced the Pyramid of Learning, a concept developed by special educator Maryann Trott and occupational therapist Kathleen Taylor. This insightful framework was brought to my attention by my colleague, Helena Vancells, whose dedication to her work and her willingness to share her research with us have been invaluable. I am truly grateful for her contributions and generosity.

To explain why early development must unfold step by step, we often use analogies that speak to the practical imagination. Imagine being asked to fly a commercial airplane with no training—no matter how willing or intelligent you are. First, you'd need to learn the basics, develop confidence, and understand the mechanics. In the same way, we wouldn't begin building a house with the chimney or the wiring. We start with the foundation. This is just as true for the child.

The Pyramid of Learning offers a clear and practical framework for understanding child development. It gives language and structure to what we observe daily: that true learning and academic readiness grow from the integration of the four foundational senses—not from early exposure to intellectual content or rote memorization. Higher cognitive capacities, such as reading and writing, rest on deeply rooted layers of sensory integration, motor coordination, neurological

organization, self-regulation and much more. This model helps us see how these developmental layers build upon one another. It offers educators and caregivers insight into why movement, rhythm, warmth, and rich sensory experiences are not just beneficial but essential to learning.

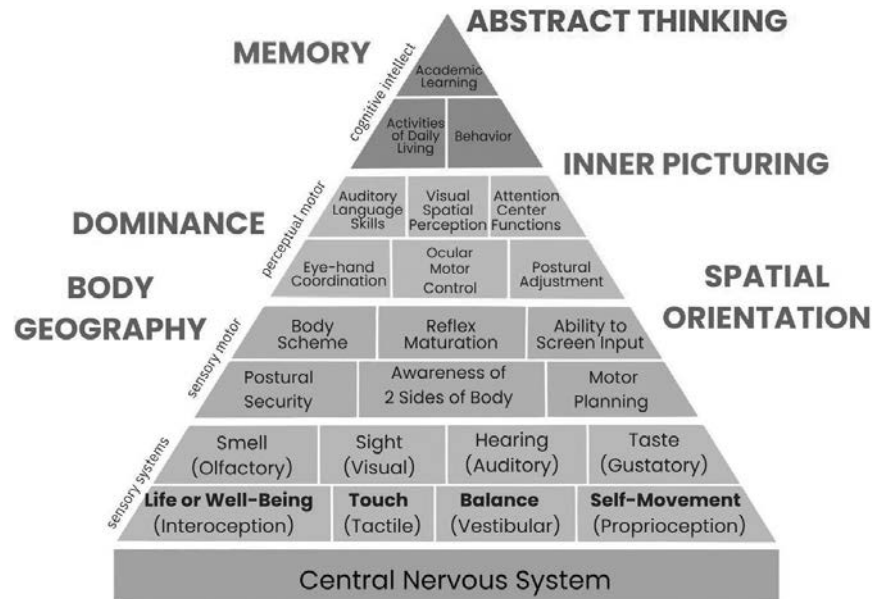
This integrated view—that development is bottom-up, sensory and movement-driven, and sequential—is not unique to Waldorf education. It is affirmed across disciplines, including neuroscience, sensory integration theory, and developmental psychology. Research shows that early sensory and motor experiences profoundly shape physical, cognitive and emotional growth.

We've found that the Pyramid of Learning aligns with the anthroposophical understanding of child development, offering shared language to engage with colleagues, therapists outside the Waldorf movement, and the families we support. To better reflect this alignment and Waldorf pedagogy, we added items to the Pyramid, such as Body Geography, Spatial Orientation, Dominance, Memory, Inner Picturing, and Abstract Thinking.

By bringing these perspectives together, we were able to visually convey to families the depth and significance of the work young children undertake in their early years before entering first grade. This message not only highlighted the relevance to Waldorf education but also addressed the universal process of preparing for higher learning, including literacy and numeracy. It became both a practical tool and a meaningful bridge—linking contemporary developmental science with the spiritual insights of anthroposophy.

The layers of the pyramid include:

1. **Central Nervous System:** The physiological platform upon which all sensory and motor development rests.
2. **Sensory System:** Includes Touch (tactile), Self-Movement (proprioception), Balance (vestibular), and Well-Being (interoception). These align with the foundational senses described by Steiner,



which influence how securely a child perceives and interacts with the world.

3. **Sensory-Motor Development:** Includes postural control, bilateral coordination, midline integration, primitive reflex integration, and motor planning. These capacities allow children to move with purpose and confidence.
4. **Perceptual-Motor Development:** Encompasses visual and auditory processing, eye-hand coordination, postural adjustment, and spatial awareness. These form crucial bases for classroom tasks like writing, drawing, and following verbal instructions.
5. **Cognitive and Academic Skills:** Blossom only when earlier layers are fully developed. This tier includes memory, inner picturing, abstract reasoning, language fluency, emotional regulation, and the ability to focus attention.

In presenting this at our family evening, we took time to review each layer and its components, highlighting the crucial role each one plays in supporting the overall structure of development. We also incorporated fun movement activities between sections to allow families to experience each capacity firsthand. This approach helped us demonstrate how our practices in Waldorf early childhood classrooms foster the development of these essential capacities.

Next, I'd like to briefly walk you through each part of the Pyramid and share how we've connected them to our work in Waldorf education. We've intentionally included both Waldorf language and terminology from contemporary developmental science to highlight the alignments between them.

The Sensory Systems

At the very base of the Pyramid are the foundational senses—they form the bedrock of a child's ability to feel grounded in their body and connected to the world around them.

- **Touch (Tactile)** offers the child a sense of boundary and form, and helps them differentiate themselves from the outer world. The sense of touch is essential for building a sense of safety, separation, and self-containment, qualities necessary for later independent thinking.
- **Self-Movement (Proprioception)** provides information from muscles, joints, and tendons about position, movement, and force. It allows the child to move with purpose without constant visual monitoring of body parts.
- **Balance (Vestibular Sense)** The vestibular system, located in the inner ear, governs our ability to maintain upright posture, coordinate spatial movement, and orient ourselves in the three dimensions of space: up/down, left/right, and front/

back. A healthy vestibular system supports not only physical balance but emotional equilibrium.

- **Life Sense (Interoception)** allows the child to perceive internal states, such as comfort, hunger, fatigue, and overall well-being. When this sense is in balance and supported by the other foundational senses, it sends the reassuring message that the child is safe—freeing them to engage more fully in learning, play, and social connection.

When these senses are supported, the child begins to trust their body and the world around them—forming the roots of trust, autonomy, and resilience—qualities essential for true learning to take place.

The Sensory-Motor System

This tier of the Pyramid of Learning represents a leap forward: the transformation of involuntary, reflexive movement into coordinated, intentional action. This integration is neither linear nor automatic. It is the result of the child's direct experiences of movement, resistance, space, and rhythm, often gained through free play, imitation, and engagement in meaningful work.

- **Postural Security** The child who has developed sufficient proprioceptive and vestibular integration begins to display postural security: the ability to maintain upright balance and orientation without constant fear of falling. From this security arises the ability to differentiate two sides of the body, a key neurological milestone.
- **Awareness of the two sides of the body (Bilateral Coordination)** At birth, movements are typically symmetrical and reflexive. Over time, the child begins to separate the right and left sides, laying the groundwork for bilateral coordination. This capacity allows the child to perform complex actions, such as tying shoes or holding paper with one hand while writing with the other. It also marks the emergence of hemispheric integration, where the brain's right and left hemispheres begin working in concert.
- **Primitive Reflex Integration** Primitive reflexes are involuntary movement patterns that play a crucial role in helping children develop coordinated movements, particularly during their first year of life. Once they have fulfilled their purpose, these reflexes generally diminish, paving the way for intentional movements. However, if they persist beyond their typical timeline, they hinder the freedom of movement

necessary for activities like reading, writing, and copying from the blackboard. Movement lessons such as eurythmy and gymnastics may prove to be challenging if these reflexes are still retained. Integrating primitive reflexes is essential for fostering higher neurological skills.

- **Crossing the Midline** (Not in the original pyramid, but added in tandem with the reflex integration.) The body is organized by invisible planes: the horizontal (top/bottom), vertical (right/left), and coronal (front/back) midlines. When children reach across these lines, they are not just moving physically—they are building neural pathways that support communication between the brain's hemispheres. Tasks such as reading left to right, writing across a page, and sequencing numbers all depend on the ability to perceive and move across midlines.
- **Motor Planning** is how the brain figures out and organizes a movement before the body does it. It helps turn an idea into action by putting together the steps, timing, and effort needed. With practice, movements become smooth and automatic. For example, a child learning to ride a bike may need to focus on each part—balancing, pedaling, steering—but once the skill is in place, the child can ride without thinking about every step.

In Waldorf pedagogy, movement is not added for enrichment—it is foundational. Activities like crawling games, rolling, balancing, and imaginative play often provide the exact sensory experiences needed for reflexes and midlines to recede naturally, allowing volitional movement and motor planning to emerge.

- **Ability to screen input** The ability to screen input is the skill of sorting through all the sensory information coming in and focusing on what's important. Young children are constantly taking in sights, sounds, and sensations, which can sometimes feel overwhelming. As this ability develops, they become better at tuning out distractions and paying attention to what truly matters—like listening to a teacher's voice instead of the noise in the background. In Waldorf classrooms, this skill is gently nurtured through our rich oral tradition, which invites children to listen with focused attention. Joyful and imaginative music, storytelling, and nursery rhymes all help engage the senses in a way that supports this growing capacity.

Emerging Capacities: Body Geography, Spatial Orientation, Dominance

As foundational reflexes integrate and the senses mature, several critical capacities begin to emerge:

- **Body Geography** refers to the internal awareness of one's own body parts and their relationships. This awareness allows children to perform daily tasks—such as dressing, climbing, or handwriting—without constant visual monitoring.
- **Spatial Orientation** is the ability to perceive oneself in space and navigate within it. It supports understanding of directionality (left/right, up/down, front/back), sequencing, and later, mathematical problem-solving.
- **Dominance** refers to the establishment of a preferred hand, foot, eye, and ear. This is a sign of neurological specialization and is necessary for developing fine motor skills, especially in writing and tool use.

These capacities form a bridge between the child's inner sensory world and the outer environment. Children begin to move with greater fluency, organize their actions intentionally, and engage with the world more independently, laying the foundation for higher cognitive activities.

The Perceptual-Motor System:

The perceptual-motor system allows the child not only to move with purpose but to perceive with clarity, coordinate complex actions, and orient themselves with precision in both physical and social space.

- **Eye-Hand Coordination** is the ability to guide hand movements with visual input—crucial for writing, drawing, tying shoelaces, and other practical life skills. In Waldorf classrooms, this capacity is nurtured through rich, hands-on activities: knitting, sewing, beeswax modeling, and form drawing. These tasks not only strengthen coordination but also weave will and attention together, forming the early seeds of concentration.
- **Ocular Motor Control** involves the harmonious functioning of the eye muscles. Children at this stage should be able to track, scan, adjust focus from near to far, and converge on a point of interest. This is essential for classroom activities like copying from a chalkboard or reading across a page. Difficulties in ocular motor control can cause fatigue, frustration, and disorganization in academic tasks.

- **Postural Adjustment** refers to the body's ability to stay upright and balanced in changing environments. It is a subtle but vital skill, enabling the child to remain stable even when shifting weight, navigating uneven terrain, or responding to sudden stimuli. This unconscious readiness supports attention and stillness—key capacities for school readiness.
- **Auditory Processing** In the classroom, children must be able to listen, process, and respond to verbal instruction. This involves auditory discrimination (hearing differences in sounds), auditory memory (remembering sequences of sounds), and auditory sequencing (understanding the order of information). In Waldorf pedagogy, oral storytelling, singing, rhythmic verses, and rich spoken language all help strengthen these capacities. Repetition and rhythm are also developmental supports for auditory processing.
- **Visual-Spatial Perception** is the ability to understand how objects relate to each other and to one's own body in space. It supports skills like forming letters and numbers, using positional language, and grasping math concepts, especially in geometry and spatial operations. In Waldorf education, this is nurtured through drawing, nature walks, handwork, and movement-based orientation activities. Research shows strong links between visual-spatial skills and math problem-solving, as children rely on spatial reasoning for place value, carrying in addition, and interpreting graphs or maps.

In the Classroom

We observe the maturation of this level as an increase in children's capacity for focused attention. They begin to sit longer in circle time, concentrate on a task without distraction, and persevere through more complex processes like felting or modeling. This is not a product of discipline, but a natural outcome of an integrated and grounded development.

Along with this comes an evolution in emotional and social development. Children begin to plan their play, articulate intentions, and collaborate with others. The play of children at this phase of maturation, typically around six years old, becomes richly imaginative and structured, with agreed-upon rules, characters, and outcomes. In Waldorf classrooms, this transformation is both observed

and gently guided, as the child moves from dreamy imitation to purposeful creativity.

Their artwork, too, reflects this shift. Crayon drawings and watercolor paintings begin to show twofold symmetry, defined figures, and thematic coherence. Rather than simply responding to color or sensation, the child begins to form an inner picture and work toward manifesting it externally—an early expression of independent thinking and self-awareness.

This phase of development signals the beginning of the child's readiness to meet the world differently. They are learning not only to balance and orient themselves physically, but also to begin relating to others, perceiving form and space, and intentionally expressing their inner world. These are the qualities that make the next tier of development possible: the birth of inner picturing, memory, and abstract thinking.

Cognitive Intellect and the Six/Seven-Year Change: The Birth of Conscious Learning

By the time a child reaches the upper tier of the Pyramid of Learning—typically around the age of six or seven—something profound begins to take place. This is not merely a continuation of earlier development; it is a threshold moment, a true transformation of consciousness.

In Waldorf pedagogy, this shift is often referred to as the six/seven-year change, or the birth of the etheric body—the formative life forces that had previously been devoted entirely to building the physical body now begin to liberate themselves for memory, imagination, and learning. This unfolding marks the beginning of true school readiness—not only in cognitive ability, but in emotional resilience and social flexibility.

In Closing

Reaching school readiness is not like suddenly flipping a light switch, but is the fruit of an integrated, sensory and movement-rich developmental journey. When the lower tiers of the Pyramid of Learning have been adequately nourished, the child arrives at the readiness for learning with confidence, curiosity, and care—ready not just to receive information, but to begin crafting their unique relationship to the world.

The Pyramid of Learning, viewed through the lens of Waldorf education, reveals a rich and layered

picture of child development. It affirms what Waldorf educators have long recognized: true learning arises not from the top down, but from the inside out and bottom up. Abstract thought is the culmination, not the starting point, of development. If earlier tiers are weak or skipped, higher-level skills rest on shaky ground.

As we work with the young child, our focus remains on supporting the foundational senses, protecting the forces of growth, and allowing development to unfold in its natural rhythm. When we honor this developmental sequence and provide the time and space for each stage to unfold organically, we help children build the strong foundation they need to thrive not just in school, but in life. ♦

Recommended Resources:

- Goddard Blythe, Sally. *The Well Balanced Child: Movement and Early Learning* (Hawthorn Press, 2008).
- Helms, Connie. "Strengthening the Foundational Senses and the Sense of Touch." thewonderofchildhood.com/2011/08/strengthening-the-foundational-senses-and-the-sense-of-touch/
- "How Do Visual-Spatial Skills Influence Math Skills?" yourtherapysource.com/blog/2019/01/15/how-do-visual-spatial-skills-influence-math-skills-2/
- Kranowitz, Carol Stock. *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Processing Disorder* (Perigee, 2005).
- Perry, Bruce D., and Oprah Winfrey. *What Happened to You? Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing* (Flatiron Books, 2021).
- "The Sensory Pyramid of Learning." developlearngrow.com/the-pyramid-of-learning/

Rie Seo currently teaches kindergarten at *The Waldorf School of Garden City* and serves as an instructor at *Sunbridge Institute*. Previously, she led programs at the *New Amsterdam School* and a Waldorf-inspired Japanese Saturday program in Brooklyn, and founded outdoor parent/child classes in Queens. Originally from Japan and now based in New York, her background in the arts, cross-cultural experiences, and therapeutic training infuse her work with creativity, depth, and reverence for the unfolding of early childhood.

An Emergent Literacy Curriculum

— Alison Reznik, Betsy Priest, Jessica Khoshabo, and Stephanie Gessow

"Where is the book in which the teacher can read about what teaching is? The children themselves are the book. We should not learn to teach out of any book other than the one lying open before us and consisting of the children themselves."

— Rudolf Steiner

Growth in our Waldorf early childhood center gave our lead teachers opportunities to review our pedagogy and clarify what we bring to the children...and why. After much conversation, study, and research our literacy curriculum was created.

At Apple Blossom Waldorf School and Family Center, we believe that literacy begins in infancy through human interactions. Birth to seven years old is a time of emergent literacy. Literacy opportunities abound between caregiver and child during caregiving moments—from feeding to diapering, through speaking and singing, in touch games and nursery rhymes. At our school, we plant the seeds for reading, writing, and comprehension. Every day, through finger games, song, poetry, circle time, eurythmy, rhythmic movement, and storytelling, these seeds are nourished.

Physical movement is essential for learning; words and language begin in the body. Abundant time outside allows children opportunities to be active, explore, and create. Nature provides children the sense of calm needed to absorb and process their experiences.

In our Waldorf mixed-age nursery and kindergarten programs, literacy education is intertwined with experience, both implicit and explicit. Literacy is practiced and developed through movement, imagination, using symbols, sequencing activities, sensory integration, and building fine and gross motor skills. This multi-modal approach meets the needs of different learning styles and different developmental stages. The skills and foundations that are formed here ready the children for all types of educational experiences in their future.

At Apple Blossom, we build foundational skills necessary for literacy in the following ways:

- **Vocabulary building** - use of rich language, nursery rhymes, circle, oral storytelling

*"When children are
at home in nature,
they are also at
home in the world."*

— Joan Almon

- **Decoding** - recognition and meaning of symbols seen daily on cubbies, school bags, chairs, story books, and in the world around them

- **Eye tracking** - bean bag games, circle time, throwing, catching, and hand clapping games

- **Comprehension** - integrating and reenacting stories in play, retelling the story

- **Bi-lateral brain development** - sweeping, skipping, crawling, climbing

- **Phonological awareness** - rhyming, alliteration, syllable clapping, tongue twisters, counting games, reciting rhyming verses

- **Fine motor skills** - finger games, dressing oneself, chopping, bread baking, painting, coloring, sewing, handwork, string games

- **Sequencing** - daily rhythms, seasonal curriculum, multi-step verbal directions and activities, rhythmic clapping, jumping rope

- **Pragmatics (social language skills)** - free play, meal times, time in the cubby room, social interaction, turn taking, awareness of body language and social cues

- **Phonology** - sound production, clapping games, nursery rhymes, rhythm, songs and story

- **Oral motor development** - modeling rich language, conversation, using cups and utensils at meal times, eating a variety of food textures, tongue twisters, variety of sounds during circle time, blowing bubbles/games

The daily rhythm of repetition builds a sense of safety for the children. The words build vocabulary and hold meaning. As teachers, we find it helpful to say what we would like the children to do...and the children internalize these words in their heads, hearts, and hands. For example, on our way outdoors for lunchtime, a line is formed at the back door and a verse

is recited by the children in one of our kindergarten classrooms. Together, we use our bodies with hand gestures and say:

Two arms to do good deeds

Two legs to run and play

One golden heart to lead the way

At Apple Blossom, our community of families make a variety of choices about when and where their children move on to new school settings. Some choose a Waldorf grade school in a nearby town as the next step, others opt to homeschool. Other children attend their local public or private school for kindergarten or first grade. To facilitate parental decision making, each fall our kindergarten teachers meet with parents of four-to-six-year-olds. We talk about developmental signs of first grade readiness, including our literacy curriculum. We share the benefits of the six-year-old remaining at Apple Blossom for their kindergarten year, allowing the world of play in early childhood to come to completion in the warm, consistent care of the teacher and class they know so well. Whenever children move on from Apple Blossom Waldorf School, the seeds of literacy have been planted, nurtured, and are ready to sprout. ♦

Resources

- Almon, Joan. "Resilience: More Than Bouncing Back," *Research Bulletin*, Autumn/Winter Volume 20 (Waldorf Publications at the Research Institute for Waldorf Education, 2015).
- Beaven, Liz, Aasen Floyd, Cathrine, and Turner, Lynn. *Nurturing All Children In Nature: Ideal Learning in the Natural World*. Available for download at trustforlearning.org/resource/nurturing-all-children-in-nature/
- Pica, Rae. "Linking Literacy and Movement." Available as a PDF download at wittfitt.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/10-Reasons-to-Promote-Emergent-Literacy-through-Movement-Active-Learning.pdf

*At Apple Blossom Waldorf School and Family Center in Wilton, CT, **Allison Reznik** is a lead kindergarten teacher, **Betsy Priest** is parent-and-child lead teacher and handwork teacher, **Jessica Khoshabo** is a founding teacher of Apple Blossom and a current lead kindergarten teacher, and **Stephanie Gessow** is the lead nursery teacher. They are all devoted to Apple Blossom's principles of trusting the wisdom of the child through imaginative play, movement, plentiful time in nature and community, with daily rhythms that lay the foundation for later academic learning and inner confidence.*

Moving Toward Independent Thinking

~ Alice Stamm

Kindergarten educators, parents, and caregivers are aware that children move first, then speak, and then think, as their development typically unfolds. The work of the young child in coming into uprightness involves complicated, integrative movements, which awaken a mood of awe and joy in the observer. Remember the unique joy felt in that first moment of seeing the child standing and taking that first step? Out of this movement comes the accompanying sounding of the vowels, registering the child's reaction to the world around. Next come the first consonants, such as "mmm," describing the mother and mothering, perhaps, as well as daddy. These sounds acknowledge the experience of stepping forward to explore the world.

The universal world of sound, with the possibility to speak every human language, first surrounds young children; gradually, through imitation, the mother tongue emerges. Through imitation, not only sounds and syntax, but also the moods around what is spoken come into the young child. New sounds achieved awaken joy in their practice and placement, like new tastes. Later on, how words are placed and form relationships with one another brings forth meaning, intention, and communication.

Teaching eurythmy and developmental movement exercises has allowed me to become very aware of the relation of movement to speech. The body moves and speech moves along with it. We all know how a misplaced word in a story or poem can cause justifiable kindergarten wrath! The rhythm of a

poem can carry the words, and this acts like a balm for the child, as movement and speech work together. In this way, meaningfulness arises through what the child is imitating.

In our time, the power to imitate is sometimes lacking or very minimal. At these times, I will often say to the children, "See if your arms can do what my arms are doing!" Through repetition, the story unfolds, and their arms follow mine, with large, slow gestures, each sound almost telling a whole story. Eurythmy's great gift is to bring the rhythmical picture quality of the sounds of language. We can all develop our sense for this quality, not only eurythmists. Even just a little movement in this direction, if felt with the heart, can be beneficial.

Through rhythmical movements we prepare the children to think livingly and creatively in the high school years, thinking for themselves, as the kindergarten children kept watch over the storyline.

The goodness of what we say, the beauty in how we say it, and the thoughtfulness of our intentions help our children to grow healthy and strong life bodies. All of this comes out of the mystery of movement bringing forth speech, and speech giving birth to thinking, through the power of imitation. ♦

Alice Stamm has been teaching eurythmy since 1975. She began her eurythmy training in Eckwalden, Germany and finished with Else Klink in Stuttgart. She serves as eurythmy faculty with Gradalis teacher training seminars.

The Importance of Nursery Rhymes, Songs, and Verses

~ Jerilyn Burke

The dictionary defines a nursery rhyme as a *simple traditional song or poem for children*. The definition is short and sweet, but the value of these little gems is immense. It is well understood that there can be deeper meanings to these poems, including archetypal powers of the characters represented, but these symbolic layers are for another discussion. Instead, we will touch upon the question of why. Why are nursery rhymes so important, beyond their arcane meanings?

Through my own research and work with children, I have discovered that there are deeper aspects to the music and verses we share with them. More than just a beautiful addition to our daily lives, each type of song, rhyme, or gesture connects to a particular aspect of a child's development and experience. As Sharifa Oppenheimer once wrote to me: "Transition songs help the child navigate movement through time (hence their predictability), whereas fingerplays and gesture games help the child navigate body-awareness and movement through space (sense of self and environment)."

Seasonal songs connect the child's sensory experiences to the rhythms of the year, supporting their sense of self and connection to their environment. Nursery rhymes, too, allow us to navigate the development of humanity through time, in a form that is both timeless and predictable. These are powerful tools for nourishing the young child on many levels.

Through nursery rhymes, children learn...

Language Development

- Expands vocabulary and introduces nuances of onomatopoeia and alliteration
- Strengthens articulation, voice modulation, and clear enunciation
- Teaches pitch, volume, inflection, and the rhythm of language
- Encourages effortless pronunciation through playful repetition

Cognitive Development

- Nurtures memory skills and inner imagery
- Introduces sequencing—beginning, middle, end—to support reading comprehension
- Builds recognition of math concepts such as number patterns, size, and weight

- Deepens understanding of vocabulary through dramatization with whole-body or hand-and-finger movements

Social and Emotional Development

- Strengthens bonds between caregiver and child through shared interaction
- Encourages positive physical touch, such as clapping rhymes and finger plays
- Supports empathy and humor by recognizing and expressing emotions in characters
- Connects children to the past through the historical nature of traditional rhymes

Years ago, at a lecture I attended on the theme of "How Storytelling and Puppetry Support Children's Language Development," Suzanne Down shed light on the extraordinary beginnings of the consonants, a principal quality of nursery rhymes. Down, director of Juniper Tree Puppets and a former Kindergarten teacher, also happens to be trained in eurythmy, an art of etheric movement. She explained that developing language is more than developing speech; it is developing the body. Etheric formative forces are active in human speech, and sounds help shape the child's whole being.

I hope this understanding inspires you to use music, song, and verse with confidence, regardless of how you think you may sound. When you are truly present and bring joy into your voice, the children will benefit, and so will you. ♦

Jerilyn Burke received her formal training in Waldorf Early Childhood pedagogy through LifeWays North America and the Rudolf Steiner Centre Toronto. She is a mother of two teens and a tween, and together with her husband, Chris, she delights in exploring anthroposophy and discovering the golden threads that connect the insights of thinkers past and present. Jerilyn is a faculty member of LifeWays North America and teaches kindergarten at The Waldorf School of Princeton.

Land-Based Literacy: Learning to Read the Land

~ Aimee de Ney

We are living through complex times, not as mere observers, but as those who are shaping the future through our work with young children. It behooves us to ask what our children need from us to be prepared for a future that leaves behind the hyper-individualism of these times and moves (again) towards reciprocal collectivity. How do we step out of the centuries that have separated us from each other and from being a part of the Lands (a relative with all life)? How do we become 'right-sized,'¹ and once again become a collective, standing in our innate power to uplift those around us, and to be reciprocally uplifted?

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and scholar who, like Rudolf Steiner, wrote extensively about education for freedom. His seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, spoke to the necessity of considering social conditions if we are to educate towards equity and liberation, much as Steiner did. Freire wrote that "reading the world precedes reading the word." We educators have the responsibility to teach students to come to know and understand the world and their place in it. Teaching children to read the world is very much the task of Waldorf early childhood educators, with our emphasis on encouraging and supporting the children's interest in the world through modeling our own. Through our authentic interest and active wondering, love, humility, and gratitude emerge. Through gratitude, joy emerges.

Anishinaabe scholar Megan Bang (along with many co-authors over the years) writes and speaks of reading Lands and Waters, much in the way Freire wrote of reading the world. By learning the patterns, relationships, colors, seasons, needs and gifts of our more-than-human relatives, these open to us and welcome us into relationship. Our true wonder builds kinship with those beings. And as we learn and wonder, we can actively bring the children along with us as we articulate what we are seeing, hearing, smelling, noticing, sensing. With us the children

engage in reading the world, the Lands and Waters, and all beings with us. The children carry wisdom and knowledge that can help us to better know the Lands and all beings. In knowing our more-than-human kin—not from a head-centered way but through embodied relational knowing—we begin to remember that we are relatives with all life. We can strive to live in reciprocity with other living beings, as reflected through our emerging pedagogy and day-to-day choices.

From the point of view of the development of the human child, we understand our brains develop through new and repeated experiences. By sharing our interest in and commitment to learning to read the Land, we are strengthening the pathways of relationship and belonging with life, of kinship. And having a foundation of reading the world, of understanding the context of the time and place where we are, and the context of the Land herself, we build pathways of responsibility, respect, and the call to humility and service that have long been ignored by the dominant culture. Our children are brilliant, and it is our responsibility as educators to uplift their brilliance and support them in bringing it into the service of the collective, into reciprocal relations with all life that do not hold the individual as the most important, but as an integral part of the whole.

How do we, as teachers, respond with an active, sincere, "I wonder?" when children bring us their curiosities about the world? This past winter we witnessed two hummingbirds joining us for snack outside. These hummingbirds had become regular guests at the snack table, eager to be in relationship with the children and teachers. They were clearly inviting the children into relationship. How, then, could we reciprocate this kind offering?

When we observe them coming for regular visits, we greet them and offer them welcome. By introducing ourselves to them, and offering them safe

¹ This is a term I have heard my teachers Daniel Foor and Shannon Willis at Ancestral Medicine speak many times. It essentially means having humility and understanding our own smallness while standing in our innate power, which comes to us from the earth and cosmos, noting that all of life holds this power, not just humans. In fact, humans are known to be the youngest siblings here on earth.

and respectful company, we open ourselves to a more intimate relationship with them. When we met them, I wondered why they were coming this snack visit every day in the *winter*? What do they eat this time of year? Do they overwinter here, or are they traveling? What is their common name? What are hummingbird's stories here in our land and beyond? What are hummingbird's gifts, their magic? The more we invest in knowing our neighbors, the more generously they will reveal themselves to us. Relationships require effort.

By learning to read the Lands we support the children in their neural development by actively wondering, relating, and learning, and we also support their coming into relationship with the Lands, waters, and all beings, learning to remember that we, too, are relatives, no more or less important than all other beings, just a younger sibling. As the younger siblings, we have much to learn from our older siblings!

An ideal way to begin the path of reading the Land is to know the names of the plants. I live on the lands of the Squaxin Island people. A few years ago, I asked Squaxin Knowledge Keeper and elder Charlene Krise what she would want settler (non-Indigenous) teachers to know or do, and she said to learn the names of the plants, because when we know each other by name, we treat each other with respect. I have been told by Waldorf teachers that teaching the children the names of plants is over-intellectualizing with them. Is teaching them their classmates' names, then, over-intellectualizing? We must trust the intelligence of our young children and support them in awakening it, not try to dull it by putting it to sleep. It is our responsibility to guide where their intelligence is turned, where they build connections. There are entire industries committed to capturing our children's attention and interest. But all of life is better served when we instead bring them into relationship with life by learning to

read the Land alongside the children. The plants are willing and ready to become new friends.

When I was teaching, I began each year by introducing the children to the plants in the garden, eventually describing which could be eaten without permission (raspberries, kale, and lemon balm), and showing them how to pick those plants in ways that help the plant grow strong. I also showed them the flowers they were allowed to pick (Dandelions, Buttercups, common clover, Periwinkle, for instance), and I made clear that they should always ask to pick anything else.

October brought our first days in the forest. As visitors in the home of the plants and animals, we would be respectful guests in their home. We introduced ourselves to them and asked permission to be there. We stayed on trails and did not pick random leaves or harm any living being. Staying aware of our impact, we sought ways to offer reciprocity to the Lands. Then we met the plants by their common English names and then their Indigenous names. Sharing our human names and then learning theirs is an act of reciprocity. As the year progressed, when guests would join us on our forest days, I would have a few children introduce our guest to our plant relatives, which they happily and readily did.

In knowing their names, we can then learn the gifts of the plants. Who are they? Where do they grow? What is their vibrant time of year? What are their gifts? Are they edible? Are they a traditional food source? Do they offer us medicine? What do they need and want from us? I have experienced that learning and sharing their traditional stories—using proper protocols of acknowledging the Indigenous peoples from whom this story came—is received as an act of reciprocity. In return, my understanding and relationships with these beings has blossomed.

When the children know the plants by name, know their gifts and stories, they build their own relationships with them and learn to listen to the plants. When harvesting anything, from a leaf, to a nibble, or a basket of berries, we introduce ourselves, offer a gift, state our intention, and ask permission. And then we listen for an answer. While the answer is often “Yes,” sometimes it is “No.” If “No” comes, the plants are teaching the children impulse control, empathy, and consent...and so much more! They are incredible teachers, generous, open and available.

As we discuss literacy in our movement, let us remember there are many kinds of literacy. For instance, as early childhood teachers, we learn to read the children: their movement patterns (senses and reflexes), physical/social/emotional/sensory needs, early signs of distress, and so on. While in Waldorf early childhood classrooms we are not formally teaching reading and writing, it is our responsibility to introduce the children to the beauty and complexity of the world.

We have the children in our care when their brains are growing exponentially. Pathways that will shape their futures are myelinating, becoming strong, secure, and flexible, much like cattails in fresh water. Our children’s futures will shape the world, just as we are shaping it now through our daily choices, which are dictated by the values we prioritize and act on. Following the lead of Indigenous educators, Knowledge Keepers, and scholars, I have chosen a path of inviting children to learn to read the Lands and Waters, inspired by the values of reciprocity, respect, and responsibility, relevant to the lands where the children are growing. In doing so, it is my intent to remember, together, that we are a part of the Land. May we uphold our responsibility to all our relatives by bringing our children into reciprocal and literate relations with Lands, Waters, and all beings.. ♦

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Aimee de Ney is a Waldorf early childhood teacher whose teaching has long been inspired by the Coast Salish lands where she is settled. Aimee is a doctoral candidate whose research centers on developing pedagogy that prioritizes generating loving and healing relationships with Lands as a move towards collective healing, cultural transformation, and climate justice. She serves as the early childhood director at Seattle Waldorf School, a regional representative to WECAN, and on Washington State’s Recreation and Conservation Office’s No Child Left Inside advisory committee. More on Aimee’s work can be found at birdsongremedies.com.

Learning the Art of Language

~ Janene Ping

*Our challenge is to create a new language,
A new sense of what it is to be human.
It is to transcend not only national limitations,
But even our species isolation,
To enter into the larger community of living species.
This brings about a completely new sense of reality and of value.*

~ Thomas Berry

When we behold a newborn child, we witness the wisdom of the cosmos working. The young child has an instinctual will that, if protected and cared for with love, gifts them with healthy growth and an awakening individuality. Very young children, at one with the life forces all around them, live in union with the physical world. This is a time of grace, supported by the devotion of the caregiver. During the first seven years, the child's consciousness gradually awakens in their "I" being. Open sensory communion with the cosmos transforms into spoken language as a mode for this communion. Spoken language, at first, lies within the infant's cries of need and joyful vocal sounds. Speech, modeled by those surrounding the child, is at first intuitively comprehended. As percept becomes accompanied by concept, communication as spoken word begins.

Communication is both a skill and an art. Georg K hlew nd, in *From Normal to Healthy*, writes of speech as a sacrament of communion that enables us to overcome isolation. It holds the power of the *logos*—power to create, and embody a life of volition. Many religious traditions hold vows of silence as part of a cleansing ritual and caution us to bring consciousness to how we use words. In Buddhist tradition, there must be three gatekeepers that guard the portal of speech: the first to ensure it is true, the second to ensure it is kind, and the third to ensure it is necessary. The biblical story of the Tower of Babel is a cautionary tale of what can happen when we lose the ability to use speech as a tool for comprehension and clarity.

As we travel further along the road of technological communication, we are increasingly surrounded by words and sounds disconnected from actual human beings, and we are far removed from these ancient Wisdom teachings. How do truth, kindness, and relevance live in the communications we receive today? In our wider experience of culture, communications are amplified and technologically dispersed through the air; we listen to AI generated words, and the spoken word is overridden by text-message slang and abbreviations that can lead to misunderstanding. We have too much information that is unsubstantiated and disconnected from our own experience, and thus truth is difficult to discern.

In building a foundation for language and literacy skills, the youngest years are a time for speaking the language of the cosmos, and reading the book of nature as it lives in the world. This is revealed in nature within and nature without, through the experience of one's own body, connected relationships with others, and the manifestation of life surrounding us. To best serve the young child's innate capacities for learning, healthy, true sensory experiences and loving connection with others are essential. These build security within, trust in the world, and support the child's intelligence to unite with engaged volition.

When I receive children in the kindergarten, they are already individualistically attuned to the realities of their world. In reverence, I seek to discover the mysteries of this individuality. Are they comfortable in their bodies? Are their senses attuned and integrated?

How do they connect with the world and with others? How does the learning modality of imitation live within them? How do they listen and speak within various relationships they encounter? This inquiry gives me an intimation of how I can meet their developmental and educational needs. Although individual needs require adaptation, the following teaching practices have helped me in working with all children:

- To strive to be fully present with each child, seeing them and hearing them with attuned attention.
- Slowing down speech. The average adult speaks between 160 and 170 words per minute, while most children between the ages of five and seven can process speech at a maximum rate of 124 words per minute.
- Accompanying words with meaningful context and gesture to assist vocabulary comprehension.
- Creating a curriculum that supports listening skills and is rich in music, verse, storytelling, and puppetry to model and build language skills.
- Positive affirmation of the child's learning capacity, supported by the teacher's loving presence, collaboration with parents, and developmental resources.

WECAN has published many rich resources for new material, which offer a variety of styles and best practices. To learn new material, begin slowly and learn each piece thoroughly to build a solid set of tools to aid your work.

Increasingly, as I meet the children born of this 21st century, it is clear that the profound importance of allowing nature's universal wisdom to work through a slow and healthy beginning in the earliest years is not well understood, nor easily accomplished. Thus, in the healing art of Waldorf education we need to create a learning experience where this is possible; support of hearing and listening skills is key. Following are some practices that I have incorporated into my work with young children to help them develop capacities in this area.

- Seasonal circle time every day. The rhythmical practice of repeating opening and closing verses, exploring seasonal poems, and singing with

others is one of our most valuable tools to help the child's vocabulary comprehension living in context to time and place. Meaningful gesture, humor, and adaptation to social behaviors and circumstances support the child's emotional and social intelligence. Daily immersion in this activity is the best support for the way young children learn.

- Building quiet times into the schedule of the day helps the child to learn self-regulation. In my work with children, I encourage quiet during storytelling, rest, painting and other arts, and meal times. Once you encourage this culture with positive affirmation of achievement in this skill, it becomes easier to maintain. These times balance others, equally important, where freedom to play and speak (sometimes loudly!) reigns.
- Along with the traditional telling of fairy tales and nature stories by adults, we can give children a space to tell stories. When I established a practice of quiet meal times, to help ensure children were able to focus on eating and didn't end up hungry afterward, these became a space for storytelling. At our quiet meal table, children who have finished eating can raise a finger if they wish to tell a story, and when they are called and begin, we all listen carefully. This works well for the older kindergarten children.
- With younger nursery-age children, the teacher may tell a story or finger play during this time. Once, at the table, after a destructive tornado had raged through our region the night before, a child raised a finger and when called, asked, "Did you hear about the big tomato that went through town last night?" I learn so much about the children and their sense of self and the world during this time!

Here are some playful games that support listening and language arts skills:

- ☞ **Clapping games** done to chants or songs, with claps marking syllable distinctions, are wonderful activities to help children listen to how words work. We also play with the tapping of rhythms. In my kindergarten, we have a gnome circle in which, at one point, the children and I play "rock" music (reportedly, this is the gnome's favorite). Each

child takes two round stones from a basket. The leader of the band plays a short rhythm with the stones, and the children then repeat that “song” a few times. Then a new leader is chosen and the game repeated.

- ☞ **What Is That Tune?** - Whether whistling, humming, or playing on the recorder flute, I create the tune of one of our circle songs, and the children listen and tell me which song it is.
- ☞ **Little Bird** - In the forest, we try to sing the birds’ song back to them after we have listened to it completely. Sometimes the birds engage in musical conversation!
- ☞ **Little Tommy Nibble Mouse** - “Little Tommy nibble mouse, lived in a little house - there came a little bee, who said three times - Buzz, buzz, buzz!” One child is chosen to be the mouse and kneels with head bowed in the center of the carpet while a silk scarf is placed over them. Another child is called to be the bee and stands behind them. When indicated, the bee buzzes three times and the first child tries to guess which friend is behind them.
- ☞ **Phonemic Awareness** is a crucial first step towards the development of literacy skill and can easily inspire simple listening games for the kindergarten-age child. The ability to recognize and manipulate individual sounds (phonemes) within spoken words helps the child identify letters. It is important for developing later reading and spelling activities. Games that involve the identifying of first or last sounds in a word, and segmenting words into individual sounds, as in rhyming games, help the child on the path to literacy.
- ☞ **Phonemic Transition Games** - When calling children who are waiting to go out to play or come in to snack, the teacher says, “All of the children

whose names begin with the “sssss” can now skip to the yard!...” Always speak the sound of the letter, rather than just its name. This can also be done for sounds at the end of names.

- ☞ Children like to play with **silly rhyming sounds** that playfully mix up the words to well-known nursery rhymes. How many variations to “Little Bo Peep” can you create?

There are so many ways to explore the support of language and literacy education for the young child! One of my favorites is telling folk tales from many lands, nature stories, and legends. The human brain is primed to learn through story. For centuries the oral tradition of storytelling not only helped the child develop language; it also communicated the moral ethics of a culture. Fairytale metaphors awaken children to the dangers and blessings of the world through universal, archetypal images. When combined with puppetry arts, there are endless opportunities for helping children develop listening skills, supporting the development of imagination, and understanding language in meaningful contexts. They are inspired to become storytellers and to process life experience through play. When we enter this field of creativity and play, we attune to the child within us, as well. ♦

*A Kindergarten teacher at the Hawthorne Valley Waldorf School in upstate NY for over 30 years, **Janene Ping** is the founder of the Magical Puppet Tree Theater (1992–present) and president of the World Association of Puppetry and Storytelling Arts. She is a core faculty member at Sophia’s Hearth Teacher Education Center in Keene, NH.*

For the Classroom

A Story in Honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.

~ Debora Petschek

In 2021 at the height of concern for equal rights and the honoring of Black lives, this story was written to bring the picture of Dr. Martin Luther King to three-, four-, and five-year-old children. It has been used by the author and colleagues as a treasured presentation of the struggle for equality to our youngest children.

Sheepland was a beautiful valley with a wide river meandering this way and that along the valley floor. The hill on one side of the river was lush and green, with abundant sweet grass. That is where the white sheep lived.

The hill on the other side of the river was hot and dry. Only brown, brittle grass grew there. This was home to the brown sheep.

There was a bridge over the river where the sheep might cross from one side to the other, but under it lived a mean troll who guarded the bridge and would not allow any sheep to cross.

The white sheep would look over at the brown hill and say, "That does not look like a nice place to be. I will stay here."

The brown sheep would look over at the green hill and say, "That grass looks so sweet and plentiful. How I wish I could cross over and try some."

But every time the brown sheep tried to cross the bridge, the mean troll would jump up waving a big stick and chase the brown sheep back to their hill. What were the brown sheep to do?

One day a kind shepherd named Martin came to the valley. He saw the green hill with its lush sweet grass. He saw the brown hill with its bitter grass. He noticed that only white sheep lived on the green hill and only brown sheep lived on the brown hill. He also saw how the brown sheep wished they could cross over to the green hill.

"This is so unfair!" he said to himself. "It will never do! I must do something to help."

So he gathered all the brown sheep and marched with them down to the bridge. When they started to cross, out jumped the troll waving his stick, ready to chase them back. But kind shepherd Martin stood his ground and would not budge. The troll shouted and waved his stick about. Still kind shepherd Martin stood there. The troll stamped his feet and growled. Still Martin stood there, not moving and refusing to leave. Finally the troll grew very tired and crawled back under the bridge to sleep.

Then good shepherd Martin led his flock of brown sheep over the bridge and up onto the green hill where they ate and ate from the plentiful sweet grass. ♦

Debora Petschek started her Waldorf journey as a parent. In that capacity she served for several years on a committee working to bring DEI into the classroom. She eventually moved into early childhood, where she taught for 16 years, first as an assistant and eventually as a lead teacher. Now, in retirement, she is caring for her 99-year-old father. In her spare time she enjoys working in her ever-changing garden, striving to make it a welcoming place for bees, birds and the elementals.

Día de Los Muertos Circle

~ Saara Fahey

This circle was written to honor and bridge Día de Los Muertos, All Hallows Eve, and Martinmas/Lantern Walk time. The images and words came to me while traveling. I woke up to the words and essentially wrote it down verbatim. I conferred with two native Spanish speakers, who confirmed the language accuracy. Included here is a picture of my installation corner, which changes with the seasons and festivals. Our Día de Los Muertos altar, always has the mariposas (butterflies), as their arrival represents the souls of the ancestors returning to visit for Día de Los Muertos.

Mirá, mirá - las mariposas están llegando...

Whoosh...blows the wind.

Vuelé, vuelé mariposa
Los ancestros están llegando.

Before we welcome our ancestors, family & friends all in
Let's make our house tidy & neat,
With a beautiful ofrenda and plenty to eat.

We grind our masa for tamales,
Grind our masa, just like so.
And bake our pan, our pan de muertos, just like so. *(Repeat)*

Now polish the windows
And sweep the floors,
So we may open wide the doors.
"¡Bienvenidos!" we say.

Whoosh...blows the wind.

Vuelé, vuelé mariposa
Los ancestros están llegando.

Meanwhile a little up north,
All the leaves are turning.
Firewood is stacked and burning. *(Repeat)*



Our Día de Los Muertos altar

Children in cities & towns big & small,
Fill the night
With their cheer and pumpkins' light.

Whoosh...blows the wind.

Vuelé, vuelé mariposa
Los ancestros están llegando.

At Waldorf schools all around the world,
We gather together big & small
United as a family one & all.
We tend our light and bring our lanterns into the world so bright
Along with our songs we fill the dark night.

Insert Lantern Walk songs you sing with your children, for example:

Glimmer lantern glimmer...

I go with my little lantern...

My lantern, my lantern...

Saara Fahey is the Rose kindergarten teacher at the Portland Waldorf School in Milwaukie, Oregon. Saara grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area in a multi-cultural home and community with a Brazilian mother and German father. From this has grown a deep desire to connect with people of all walks of life. She wholeheartedly believes in the cultivation of a magical childhood and is dedicated to creating an environment where all children feel at home in her classroom.



The Tomten Circle

~ Sarah Mortenson-Gauss

To honor and include a hearing impaired student, gestures for the animals and some other words come from American Sign Language (ASL). Checking with the ASL website will lead to a dictionary of signing gestures.

Song: The North Wind Doth Blow

The north wind doth blow
And we shall have snow
And what will the robin do then
Poor thing
He'll sit in the barn to keep himself warm
And hide his head under his wing
Poor thing

Spoken:

On the old family farm
It's a cold winter's night
The snow is lit up
By the moon shining bright

The night is so still
No words, not a peep
Could it be that
Everyone's fast asleep

The Tomten's awake
But who could he be?
He's a kindly old gnome
'Bout as tall as my knee

The people don't see him
But sometimes they see
His tiny footprints
As small as can be

Does he crawl along?
Does he hop along?
Does he skip along?
Does he jump along?

They don't know
They just see his footprints
Outside in the snow

With his long gray beard
And his slouchy red hat
He makes friends with
The cows, the sheep, and the cat

Walk in circle holding hands

Stomp feet
Walk in circle holding hands
Tuck head under arm
Stomp feet

Sign "farm"
Cross arms, shiver
Squat down, hands move out over ground
Arms circle upwards while coming to standing

Stiff arms down and out at 45 degrees
Finger to lips, then shake head "no"
Palms up
Tilt head to left, resting on hands together

Fingers splayed on each side of face
Palms up
Pull down from chin, as if a beard
Lift one knee up, hold with hands

Index fingers touch outside edge of eyes, shake head
Get down on hands and knees
Looking closely at the ground
One hand gestures small with thumb and index finger

Crawl some distance around the circle
Hop some distance around the circle
Skip some distance around the circle
Jump some distance around the circle

Shake head side to side
Get on hands and knees
Looking down at the ground

Pull down from chin
Both hands above head, bounce down, touch head
Sign "friends"
Sign "cow, sheep, cat"

He talks to them with Tomten words
Words that we can't hear
The animals, they understand
To them it's very clear

First he visits the cows (pause)
They're dreaming of when
Their pastures are green
And delicious again

"I see the fence around your pasture
needs some mending."

He brings out his saw
His hammer and nails

He's ready to fix up the old fence rails

Sing the Tomten Song:

Winters come and winters go

Summers come and summers go
I'll bring you food and care for you

I'll be your friend the whole night through

Spoken:

Next, he visits the sheep
In their pen
Wool coats keep them cozy
Though they are hungry again

"I see that the food
In your trough is all gone
Here is some hay
To make you happy and strong"

Sing the Tomten Song again

Spoken:

Now he comes 'round the corner
And what does he find?
A bowl full of porridge
The sweet and buttery kind

Where did it come from?
How can this be?
It's a gift from
The grateful farm family!

*Lean toward right, cup hand by mouth
Lean toward left, cup hand by mouth (whisper)
Sign "animals," sign "understand"
Sign "understand" 3x*

*Sign cow
Get on hands and knees, close eyes
Open eyes, sign "green"
Rub tummy*

Kneel, turn 360 degrees, look

*Palms together, move out and back
Pound left palm with right fist
Hold imaginary nail with left, pound with right
Repeat above*

*Lean right on one foot, hands move to right
Lean left on one foot, hands move to left
Same as above
Walk toward center, hands gesture forward
Walk backward, hands gesture back
Spin in a circle, arms out
Walk in, hold hands or touch neighbors' shoulders*

Sign "sheep"

*Cross arms, rub hands up and down upper arm
Rub tummy*

Kneeling, hands behind back, lean forward to look down

*Twist around to gather hay from behind, put down in front
Point to smile and show off arm muscles*

*Kneel, walk on knees
Arms behind, bend over, looking at ground
Scoop up bowl with both hands
Smiling*

*Palms up by shoulders
Shrug shoulders
Palm together at chest
Bow, sign "family"*

He loves to eat porridge
But even more than that
He loves to eat porridge
Along with the cat!

Now where is the cat?
He climbs up to the loft
Surely she's sleeping
Somewhere warm and soft

There in the corner
He sees a straw pile
Where the barn kitty
Makes her domicile

She's waiting for Tomten
He might bring a scrap
Of fish or of porridge
Before her catnap

They eat porridge together
They share this sweet treat
And, there's more in the bowl
For others to eat

Sing the Tomten Song again

Spoken:
So out goes the Tomten
Back out in the snow
There's more porridge to share
To the forest he'll go!

He'll cross over the river
And roll down the hill
He'll crawl through the bushes
Then shake off the chill

Who else could be hungry?
There's not much food around
On the trees or the bushes
Or even the ground

Maybe the fox?
Maybe the moose?
Maybe the raccoon
Or the Canada Goose?

Sing the Tomten Song once more

*Eat with spoon and bowl
Index finger of right hand points upwards, slightly forward
Eat with spoon and bowl
Sign "cat"*

*Palms up
Step up onto box or bench and walk along
Look around
Jump down*

*Sitting with legs open in a V, arms in a V resting on legs
Hands form shape of a straw pile
Sign "cat"
Cross legs, lean forward, bring leg under, sit like a cat*

Pretend to lick paws and bathe ears

*Hand swims like a fish, then hands form bowl
Close eyes, purr*

*Take bite with bowl and spoon
Offer a bite to your neighbors
Sign "more"
Sign "eat"*

Take steps as if walking in deep snow

*Walk across the board or balance beam
Log roll or somersault down the mat
Crawl through one of the tunnels
Shake body*

*Rub tummy
Shake head back and forth
Reach high with hand, stand on tiptoes
Get on hands and knees, looking at ground*

*Sign "fox"
Sign "moose"
Sign "raccoon"
Sign "goose"*

Sarah Mortenson-Gauss teaches mixed-age kindergarten and parent child classes at Windsong School in Spokane, Washington. After having spent a year living in Norway, she became quite fond of the Scandinavian lifestyle, the culture, and also the art and folklore of the Nisse, as it's called in Norway or the Tomte, as it's called in Sweden. This circle was inspired by one of her favorite picture books, *The Tomten*, by Astrid Lindgren, as well as by a desire to bring examples of practical work and caring to the children in her class.

A Valentine Circle

— Laura Esposito

WINTER GARDEN INTRODUCTION:

Singing:

In our winter garden
through the gates we go
stars are gleaming streaming
to the earth below!

Skipping and falling down two or three times

SING A SONG OF SIXPENCE ACTION:

Singing:

Sing a song of sixpence
a pocket full of rye
Four and twenty blackbirds
baked in a pie.
When the pie was opened
the birds began to sing.
Wasn't that a dainty dish
to set before the king?

The king was in his counting house
counting out his money.
The queen was in the parlor
eating bread and honey.

The maid was in the garden
hanging out the clothes.

Along came a blackbird
and kissed her on the nose.

Hold hands and circle

*Walk to center together
Walk out together
Fingers as "beaks" to gesture birds singing*

*Jumping, cross and uncross legs;
do slowly with younger children
Put on "crown"
Arms outstretched, hands clap alternating on top
Put on "crown"
Crisscross arms outstretched in front
and grab "food" in each hand, bring to mouth to eat
Curtsy
Bend at waist, use fingers as pincers to pick up clothes
and hang above head*

Hands gesture flying bird to nose

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS BEANBAGS:

Toss beanbags to each child

The Queen of Hearts
she made some tarts
all for Valentine's day.
The Knave of Hearts
he stole the tarts
and took them straight away,
and took them straight away.

The King of Hearts
called for the tarts
and beat the Knave full sore!

The Knave of Hearts
brought back the tarts
and vowed to steal no more!

*Place beanbag on head
Drop and catch beanbag in hands
Alternate beanbag back and forth between hands
Place beanbag on head
Drop and catch beanbag in hands
Pass beanbag behind back, one way then the other*

*Place beanbag on head
Drop and catch beanbag in hands
Pat body all over with beanbag*

*Place on head
Drop and catch beanbag in hands
Hold beanbag up in both hands while down on one knee*

All stand, invite children to throw bag into basket "If you are wearing [color]..."

RUMBLY BUMBLY BELLIES MOVEMENTS:

Set up includes a "tunnel" to indicate a "mountain" that leads back to the circle rug, with a door that can be uncovered by teacher

The rumbly bumbly bellies,

of the Queen and King,
made the mountains
shake and quake,
and the stars to sing!

They ate up
all the rocks and socks,
They wanted more and more,

But still their bumbly bellies,
Rumbled like the shore.

Then a dove dove down,

And told them both to hear,
"Your rumbly bumbly bellies...
...are hurting all our ears!"

Suddenly a little door
in the mountain appeared,
with light that shone from way inside,
and nothing to be feared.

While children are crawling through:
They crawled on through,
their crowns fell off,
they were safe and such.
Inside the mountain
they heard a voice say,
"I love you very much".

Repeat as needed until all are back to circle rug

And so their bumbly bellies
didn't rumble anymore.

They curled up in the mountain,
and were quiet forever more.

*With rounded arms held out in front of body, one hand
some distance above the other ('B' gesture), bounce up
and down, bent at knees
Stand up and put on "crown"*

*Hands on hips, alternate weight side to side
Motion from out of mouth upwards*

*Bend at waist and grab at ground and gobble
Slowly stand upright with arms outstretched
stacking on top of each other
'B' gesture, bounce up and down, bent at knees
Make "waves" with hands*

*One arm up, one down,
fly around in circle in place and "land" with bent knees
Hand cupped at ear
'B' gesture, bounce up and down, bent at knees
Cover ears*

Slowly uncover "door"

*Sitting in circle on rug, rub belly in circular motion,
speaking with a slow, gentle tone*

Lie down and curl up

RESTING SONG:

Singing, repeat, then hum
Deep in the mountain, dark is the night,
but low in the sky, I see a bright light.
Run little shadows, swiftly away,
the bright morning star is calling the day.

Laura Esposito has been a Waldorf early childhood teacher since 2009. She wrote this movement journey for her kindergarten class with the intention to nurture the image, or seed, that there is something inside that is not touched by the world, and allowing the children to rest in the knowledge and comfort of that space. Laura currently lives in Doylestown, PA, where she is working with children aged one to three.

Little Ones – More Than Just a Doll

~ Cordula Hetland

Imagine yourself listening...

The morning sun shines through the windows. We hear the birds singing their morning song. Nettle, my Little One, begins to tell her story—a story Fairy Mother has shared with her:

On a warm autumn day, when the sun was shining brightly and the leaves had turned golden like the sun itself, a very special Little One was born. His name was Goldenleave. He loved to play under the big old oak tree.

Year after year, he waited for the leaves to turn golden again on his birthday, and it brought joy to his heart. He loved watching the golden leaves gently fall to the ground, carried by the wind.

As Goldenleave grew up, it was soon time for him to leave Little Land and travel to the Land of the People. But before that, he had to prepare himself for the journey. He gathered strength, courage, wisdom, and love from all the beings who cared for him in Little Land and carried them with him when it was time to go.

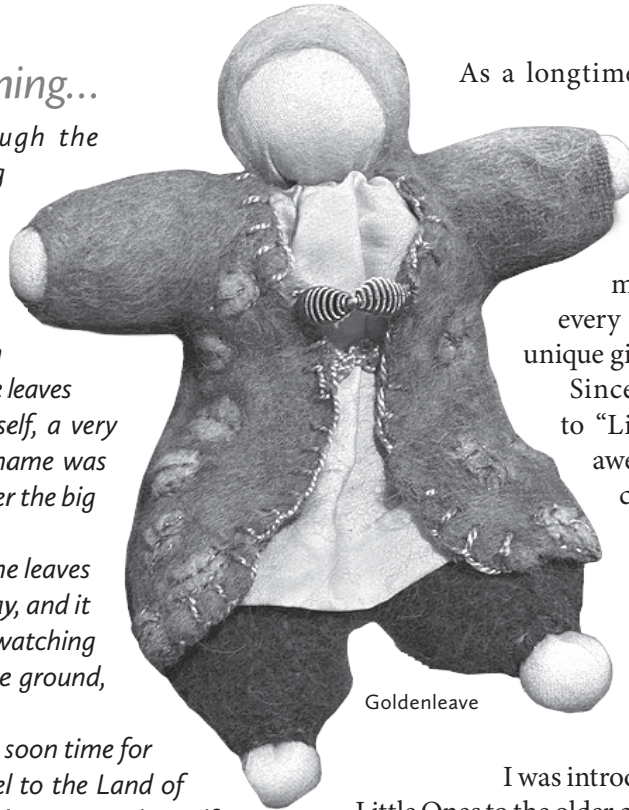
It was a long journey, but he finally arrived in the Land of the People. Exhausted and tired, he sat down under a beautiful tree. Suddenly, while dreaming, he heard a gentle voice calling to him... a voice he had never heard before. Was it the voice of the person he was going to meet soon in the Land of the People?

"I am waiting for you," he heard.

Excited, Goldenleave woke up and continued his journey. He came to a beautiful meadow, where he could hear children playing, singing, and dancing. He felt as if he had found his new home. He sat down in the tall green grass and watched quietly.

He was so deep in thought that he didn't notice a tall, beautiful boy had come close. When the boy saw him, he smiled, and when their eyes met, they both knew—it was the boy who had patiently waited for Goldenleave's arrival, whose voice had been heard in his dreams...

* * *



Goldenleave

As a longtime Waldorf kindergarten teacher, I'm always striving to create magical moments for the children in my care. There are so many ways to do this—and every teacher brings their own unique gifts.

Since I was first introduced to "Little Ones," I've been in awe of the deep connections children can form with a doll. We allow them to build this bond by encouraging their imagination to remain free and open. Every child connects in a deeply individual way.

I was introduced to the idea of gifting Little Ones to the older children in my classroom. I felt excited—but also a little anxious. For many weeks, I imagined myself creating them. Finally, I found my own way to bring them to life in the classroom.

Steps Before Making the Doll

Once I decided which student would receive a Little One, I began the process of imagining the child's nature—how they presented themselves in the classroom and at home—and what might support them in their journey ahead. This process brought me very close to each student in a deep and heartfelt way. It opened a gateway for me to receive an image of the doll—its name, colors, and other features. I learned to trust this process as an important tool. Sometimes I would ask a child or parent about favorite colors, flowers, trees, or other parts of nature to gather more concrete inspiration before starting the doll.

Finding the Right Material

Having a wide variety of old sweaters and fabrics makes the next step feel like a true adventure. I love pairing colors and shapes that complement the name



Sample of a pouch made by a child



A child holding her Little One



Fern resting in a bed made by children after arriving

I've chosen for the Little One. Every teacher will have their own way of creating the doll, and there are endless wonderful methods. What's most important is to use only natural materials—ideally soft ones. The dolls should be no more than 9–10 inches long so they can fit in a pouch to be carried around the neck.

Finding the Name

The name often emerges through the imagination process or while crafting. Sometimes it whispers itself quietly through the story.

Introducing the Little Ones to the Class

Children who are going to receive a Little One begin by making a pouch to carry it in. Before the first Little One arrives, it's important to build a welcoming atmosphere. You should have your own Little One begin sharing stories regularly—stories about Little Land and Fairy Mother caring for the Little Ones. Let your imagination soar freely. These precious circle times are ideal for sharing such tales.

When the first Little One is ready to travel to a child, let your own Little One share a story about how the new doll was prepared for the journey and how it received its name from Fairy Mother.

The Arrival

When the time is right, choose a special day and moment for the Little One to appear. This could happen during classroom free play, on a forest walk, or out at the playground. Involve the entire class in the discovery. Let the Little One whisper its name to your own doll first, so they can share it with the children—along with the story of how the name came to be.

Caring for the Little One

It's essential to have conversations with parents about the Little Ones. They play a key role in protecting and preserving the magic we're creating. I believe Little Ones should go home with the children. In my experience, this allows parents to be actively involved in the magic and deepen the connection between home and classroom.

What Do Little Ones Mean to Us and the Children?

Little Ones are so much more than dolls. For us as teachers, they represent a special pathway into the soul of the child. They change the nature of our connection, deepening our bond for years to come. They help keep us connected to the magical world of nature and the unseen world within.

When we create them, we are giving birth to something entirely new—something that brings transformation both to the maker and the child who receives it.

In today's world, more than ever, teachers are being called to protect the wonder and magic of childhood, to create safe and sacred spaces for the children in our care. Little Ones can help bring that magic into our classrooms, and I'm forever grateful for the profound effect they have on children and families alike.



Little Ones' farewell celebration before summer break

For the child, a Little One is a companion like no other—full of life and magic, a soulmate and friend who shares both joy and sorrow. The doll allows children to enter the world of imagination and wonder, and to remain there even as they transition into the grades. It becomes a bridge from Kindergarten to the world of school. It can also be a healer and a protector. Little Ones will be a part of children's lives for many years to come. ♦

Cordula Hetland was born in Germany, where she first experienced the warmth and wonder of Waldorf early childhood education. After training and working as an early childhood educator for over a decade in Europe, she relocated to the United States, where she now teaches in the mixed-age kindergarten of Whidbey Island Waldorf School. One of her greatest joys has been bringing the "Little Ones" to life, an experience that extends beyond the classroom to touch the hearts of children and parents alike.

Standing By Our Words

~ Stephanie Hoelscher

The power of words. Public and private; shadow and light; sacred and profane. Words carry truths; they are impactful even when depleted of meaning. Words matter. What words can one stand by as stepping stones into clarity of thought, action, and purpose? What words does one stand by as gateways into a wider web of affirmations of what we do, why, and how?

I share with you five good words, words I turn to for help in the creation of images to guide children back into imagination, imitation, and play. They also keep me grounded to what is essential in a time of change. Lastly, these five good words prompt me to stay honest, authentic, and accessible in how I talk and write to others. Five good words that I hold in my pocket.

"Home."

The wellbeing of the warm animal protected in its nest is a sense of safe haven that we all share, adult or child. Home, in this imagination, is not a physical space but any inhabited space that bears the essence of "home" as

an experience of closeness, of being present, authentic, and connected in the relationships we have with others. Home conjures up sacred hospitality. Home is serving the tea, watering the plants, laying a blanket on the grass for my parent-child class, the greeting at the gate upon arrival and the escort upon departure.

Home holds hands with "Earth."

We help children build bodies that are happy homes, and this happens on Earth: The Earth is firm beneath my feet. Earth is my gateway imagination into a pedagogy rooted in place and purpose. In our day-to-day work with the children, Earth graces me with concrete and imaginative possibilities. When I talk about rhythm with parents, I turn to Earth. When I strive to create a shared understanding with families about the need for movement, practical work, and play, I share living pictures of the children that are intimate, proximate, and specific to the here and now on Earth. One may trust that wonder, awe, and joy await

discovery when walking on Earth if certain conditions are met: patience, presence, attention. Earth grounds, inspires, recalibrates. Perhaps most importantly, Earth awakens us to the urgent need for healing.

Home and Earth flow into “Play.”

As a recognized right of childhood under the United Nations, play is a pillar of our pedagogy and a gateway into understanding, alliance-building, experimentation, and self-development. Play is a bridge into lively conversations with parents in that it begins with a common, shared experience. We all have played. Play is a lens into understanding children; it allows for observations, which in turn are a mirror of how I need to be in order to guide them in their own becoming. In their play, children are telling me to deepen my skills at facilitating play. They ask me to be playful, to bring a light note, to infuse the spoken word with a spirit of the silly in puppetry and storytelling, because in the end, it is good not to take things too seriously.

Play flows into “Spirit.”

Spirit first came to me in the form of a single encounter. In an intimate scene familiar to us all, parents and teachers sat in a circle for a meeting. An assistant teacher spoke to describe how she perceived her role with their children: “I see my job as keeping the heartbeat.” These words brought the circle to a threshold of a new way of seeing, an animating courage, and provided me with my working understanding of Spirit. The root of Spirit is the Latin *spirare*, to breathe. The circle breathed together. We are led to feel ourselves inextricably part of something larger than the narrow, personal, ego-defined self.

We are reminded of the world’s permeability and our interconnectedness with all beings and the natural world. Spirit brings us to find meaning and purpose in life. It opens the door to beauty, wonder, and awe.

All Stream into “Wisdom.”

Wisdom awaits. Wisdom is the repository of everything that has come before me. Wisdom resides in the next person we meet; it shines in the play of children; it rustles through the leaves on the wind through the trees. Wisdom waits to be received through serving, caring, being open to needs beyond oneself. Are we available, accessible, accepting, adapting, attuned, attentive, and listening? Standing by wisdom means that our differences do not divide us; we do not stand on opposite banks of the river, but join together in currents carrying knowledge of the past dissolving into the present, illuminating a way into a future.

Home, Earth, Play, Spirit, Wisdom:

Five good words premised on freedom, stitched together with attention intertwined with the connective tissue of love and hope. Words to stand by, as an ode to being human. What are your five good words? ♦

Stephanie Hoelscher *lives in central Vermont with her family, dogs, and chickens. A long-time early childhood teacher in New England, she is an active member of the WECAN Research group and contributed to the WECAN publication, *Becoming and Belonging*. With a background in anthropology, she strives to bring to Waldorf education the power of observation, participation, and deep listening*

Book Reviews

Speech Development in the Digital Age: Hidden Treasures of the Spoken Word

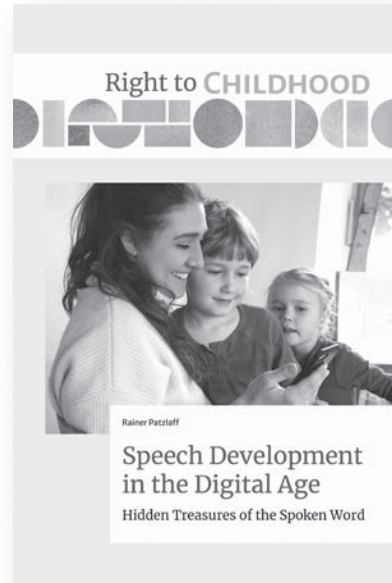
Rainer Patzlaff (WECAN, 2024)

Reviewed by Jill Taplin

This 30-page booklet is a revised and updated version of *Childhood Falls Silent*, which was published in 1999 in German and then translated and published in English. In the intervening years, not only have we had the Covid-19 pandemic, with consequent disruption to child development, but there has also been an explosion in the prevalence of digital media. The first part of this booklet focuses on the decline in functional literacy which has happened as electronic media use has increased, and on the sharp rise in speech development disorders, said here to be affecting one in three of German pre-schoolers.

We can intuitively connect that the rise in electronic media and the rise in speech developmental disorders are related. It is hard to find well-founded research which links the two directly. However, as Rainer Patzlaff suggests, it is clear that children and their parents are spending more time engaging with screens and that this takes away time from play and conversation, both of which do assuredly support healthy development.

The second part of the booklet I found very engaging. It has some interesting points



about the distinction between genuine human speech and electronically submitted language. When we speak, our whole body, including more than 100 muscles, is involved. This is imitated by the child and this unconscious imitation is what supports the child in learning the art of speaking. Additionally, the production of speech sculpts the air (as do eurythmy movements) and there are some photographs of this dynamic effect. We understand that the unconscious activity of the body shapes the development of the brain. Of course, when speech is electronically reproduced, there

is neither any sculpting of the air nor any micromovements of the body, for the child to imitate, with consequent limitations on brain development.

As stated by Patzlaff, there is no 'I' to connect with the child and no spiritual process takes place: "Electronic speakers lack the human quality that is required to promote child development" (p.23). Patzlaff argues that language and speech are a shared experience of "movement and streaming forms," which offer the child rich layers of experience beyond the words themselves (p.24). This I found a cogent explanation.

In the case of the very young, musicality and formative forces combine with rhythmical repetition to both delight and healthily nourish the child, as we see with well-loved nursery and nonsense rhythms. We do have well-supported research which supports this. By the age of around two years, the physical forces developed by imitating the movement of speech are transformed into forces of imagination and now the imaginative picture created by the words becomes increasingly important. Unlike screen images, it is the child's own inner activity which creates imaginative pictures

from the words which they hear, for example in a told or read fairy tale. Patzlaff describes this as a process where language forms the soul and encourages us to use “imaginative and concrete language” to support healthy soul development. He suggests that we sometimes investigate the etymological origins of words to re-enliven our own language consciousness.

Although I would like to have seen more references to research to support the theory, which seems so intuitive, that increasing digital and electronic experiences and increasing speech development disorders are causally linked, I value this booklet for the account of what the title calls the “hidden treasures of the spoken word.” This is certainly something that can be described and discussed with

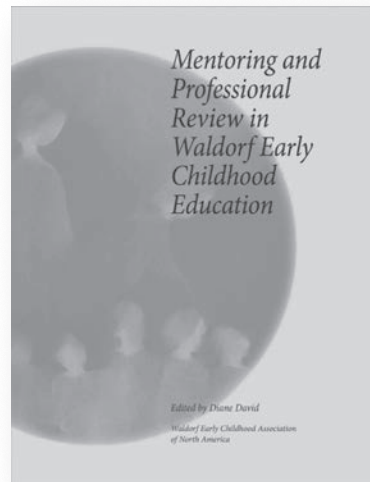
parents. Increasingly the parents coming towards us have grown up in an environment filled with electronic experiences and are more and more likely to use digital media as a source of information and entertainment. We need better resources to support them in appropriately protecting and nourishing their children. We cannot condemn them, because digital media exposure is inescapably part of their world, but we do need lively and creative ways of inspiring them to make changes which will benefit their children. This booklet is a useful source, but we need more, in my opinion, to help families make practical changes which will allow the treasures of the spoken word to work their magic on young children. ♦

Mentoring and Professional Review in Waldorf Early Childhood Education

Edited by Diane David (WECAN, 2025)

Reviewed by Nancy Blanning

The updated edition of *Mentoring and Professional Review in Waldorf Early Childhood Education* is a practical resource for Waldorf educators acting as mentors and professional observers or evaluators. This volume combines two WECAN books originally published in 2007, which considered mentoring and professional observations separately. It is updated and enriched by the editing of Diane David. The wise inclusions from the previous editions are as



relevant as ever and are enriched with three new articles. Articles give guidance on what to look for and how to describe what we see as both accomplishments and areas still developing. There is advice on developing productive conversations that inspire and encourage others in their striving rather than cause the teacher to feel deflated.

Writing a report is an accompanying responsibility for the mentor and evaluator. For a mentored teacher, the report is a

private summary of observations and suggestions. When a school engages an evaluator, an objective, informative report needs to be prepared for the institution. The report aims to describe how the essential qualities of Waldorf early childhood pedagogy, as described in Susan Howard's article "The Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education" (included in this volume) and elements of the classroom morning are fulfilled. This is a professional document shared with both the teacher and school that is kept with the teacher's records. It needs to be as objective as possible, free from personal sympathies or antipathies.

Self-development of the educator is an essential in Waldorf education, as this volume emphasizes. The book also contains self-evaluation forms to be completed before the visit. All the questions on the form

are pertinent for the mentor and evaluator as well. Chapters in the volume by Andrea Gambardella ("Self-Education as the Basis for the Art of Mentoring") and Louise deForest ("Mentoring and Evaluating: Similarities and Differences") remind us that we must be working on the same things in our personal and professional life. If we are going to observe others, our "mirrors" must be clear so we can reflect back truthfully. Preparing for the visit can be a prod toward our own self development.

This volume includes practical lists and forms in the appendix, which can be photocopied and used with each visit. These are great reminders of what we are looking for and great time savers.

The book opens by speaking about building relationship between one another as an essential calling of our times. Quoting from Diane David's opening words

seems a fitting way to close this short review of *Mentoring and Professional Evaluation*.

"The essence of our human experience is one's relationship with another human being. When a space can be created between two human beings—a point of stillness, where we listen, speak truth, share, and then come to a new or transformed idea—an enlightening and soul-filled experience takes place. And this takes some work."

While there may be checklists at the end of this book, there is nothing systematic about this process. To be a Waldorf early childhood teacher, whether experienced or fresh out of a teacher education institute, we know we must always put the child at the center of our work. Around this child we create an ethic of care, open ourselves to create resonance with another, and act out of responsibility. ♦

Free Movement from the Very Start, Volume I

Jane Swain (WECAN, 2025)

Reviewed by Nancy Blanning

Families with younger and younger children are coming toward our Waldorf programs seeking care which will nurture their children and help them grow well. Our society values speed and accomplishment, so most early education tries to accelerate development in all ways.

But Rudolf Steiner shared with Waldorf education a different picture. Little children need gentle and unhurried care and accompaniment as they enter life. They are not miniature adults who want to be pushed. The consciousness of children three and under is dramatically different than that of their older peers. Rudolf Steiner emphasized the very special nature of the first three years. How these years are supported for the child will be critical for the whole of life. Out of this wisdom Birth-to-Three as a focus is developing as a new specialty. Yet no matter what age group we work with, all educators need to know as much as we can about this opening phase of children's lives.

Free Movement from the Very Start gives the most comprehensive consideration to these unique years that I have ever seen. Years of study, experience, and research are shared in these pages by author Jane Swain. Her credentials include being a pediatric physical therapist, Waldorf movement therapist, adult educator, and mentor. Mainstream studies of sensory development, reflex movement patterns, and sensory integration are combined with anthroposophically inspired Spatial Dynamics, and Pikler care for infants and toddlers. Jane makes evident how each of these streams confirm, inform, and give confidence that the developmental plan each child carries into life as a spiritual gift is wise and valid for these years. Unhurried time and space are needed for these developmental intentions to be fulfilled. The child needs to be allowed "free movement from the very start."



The journey into movement is well described and documented in the book's first section. Early reflex movement patterns to standing and walking—and the gross and fine motor accomplishments in between—are thoroughly discussed and illustrated. The text is supported by many, many delightful photos of children doing just what the text has explained.

The next major section is devoted to the twelve senses, as described by Rudolf Steiner, and emphasizes the important work of supporting the child's foundational senses of touch, life/well-being, movement, and

balance. This section is particularly impressive with the references drawn from Steiner lectures and mainstream research that validates the practices of we already use and are further developing in Waldorf programs.

Appendices offering a bounty of practical suggestions for how to provide an inviting, developmentally appropriate environment conclude the book. Toys, furnishings, arrangement of the room, and outdoor experience in all seasons are just a few of the topics discussed.

Free Movement from the Very Start is painstakingly researched and enlivened with examples from Jane's personal and professional experience. Suggestions for setting up an inviting space where children can explore through their own self-initiated movement make this volume practical.

Volume 2 will complete this developmental journey through age seven. I personally can hardly wait to have the full set. The thorough research, the clear of discussion of concepts, plus the warmth, respect, and honoring given toward the developing young child make this book series exceptional. In my personal view, this will rise to be the new gold standard within child development publications. It will be an important resource for everyone's library. ♦

Concluding Thoughts

What Grows Slowly, Grows Strong

A Reflection on the Purpose of the Waldorf Kindergarten

~ Heike Adamsberger

In our time, when the pace of life seems ever-quickenning, even our youngest children are swept along in the current of expectation and intervention. A quiet question begins to rise among us: are we asking too much of our early childhood classrooms? And at what cost?

The Waldorf kindergarten was never meant to be a place of hurried preparation or remediation. It is, and always has been, a sanctuary—a warm, rhythmic, and nurturing environment where the child under seven is held in deep trust. Trust in their innate wisdom to unfold at their own pace. Trust in the nourishing forces of play, imitation, song, story, purposeful work, and the beauty of warm human relationships.

Yet, increasingly, as pressures and worries from parents in the grades increase and, in turn, pressure from the grades toward the early childhood teachers rises, and as well-meaning specialists bring their concerns to our doorstep, we find ourselves tempted to take on more.

More targeted activities.

More interventions.

More fine motor practice, pencil grip exercises, and early literacy exercises disguised as play.

Of course, these are born of care and good intentions. Who among us does not wish to support the children entrusted to us? But we must ask—at what point does this layering of “support” begin to replace the quiet, steady stream of life-sense-supporting activity that flows through the very architecture of our early childhood curriculum?

When we bring too much directed activity into the kindergarten, we risk something subtle yet profound.

We risk crowding out the breathing space of our kindergarten days itself. We risk turning our gentle, living classrooms into something resembling therapy centers, where every moment is measured, and every play experience engineered toward an outcome.

But childhood is not a problem to be solved. It is a wonder to be witnessed.

Our curriculum—rich in movement, story, handwork, nature, purposeful activity, and healthy

rhythm—already offers deep and holistic nourishment for the developing senses, the young child’s fine and gross motor skills, language and social growth, and the foundations of executive functioning. It strengthens the will, nourishes the senses, and supports the unfolding of the whole human being. It has done so faithfully for a century.

When we trust in this, we allow the kindergarten to remain what it is meant to be:

A hearth.

A place where the child feels at home in the world.

A space where foundational capacities grow organically, not through rushed interventions, but through meaningful participation in life itself.

This is not to say we close our eyes to the needs of individual children—of course not. But we must be careful not to let the genuine gifts of therapeutic support override the living wholeness of the Kindergarten experience. Therapeutic elements live already in the healthy rhythm, warm relationships, the joyful circle times, the imagination-feeding stories and puppet shows, and daily purposeful work. Let us not underestimate their quiet power.

In our striving to help, let us remember:

There is deep health in simplicity.

There is profound support in warmth and rhythm.

There is quiet medicine in the beauty of unhurried childhood.

May we guard this space with reverence, not out of resistance to change, but out of deep love and understanding for the growing child. And may our kindergartens remain places of joy, play, and quiet unfolding—not clinics of correction, but homes for the soul of the child.

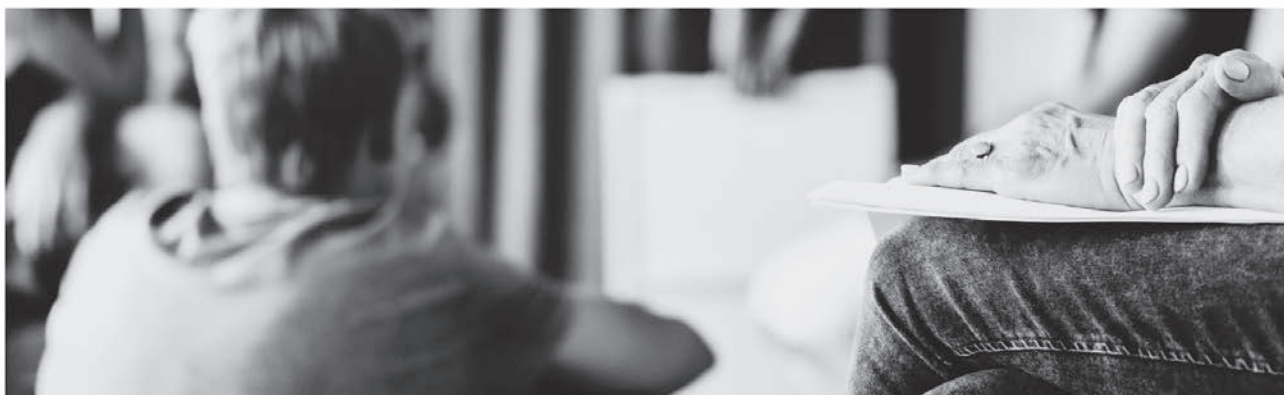
May the child’s days be woven of wonder and work, of laughter and rest. May their hands be busy with purpose and beauty, their feet steady upon the earth, and their hearts light with joy. And may we, as their guides, hold fast to the wisdom of slowness, knowing that what grows slowly grows strong and true. ♦

*Born and raised in Germany, **Heike Adamsberger** spent her formative years with her Austrian grandparents near the Baltic Sea and in the southern German forests. The last 30 years of her life have been devoted to educating and nourishing young children. She has longstanding experience as a Waldorf kindergarten teacher and serves as the WECAN representative in Southern California.*



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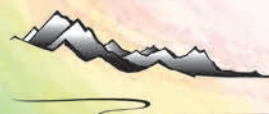
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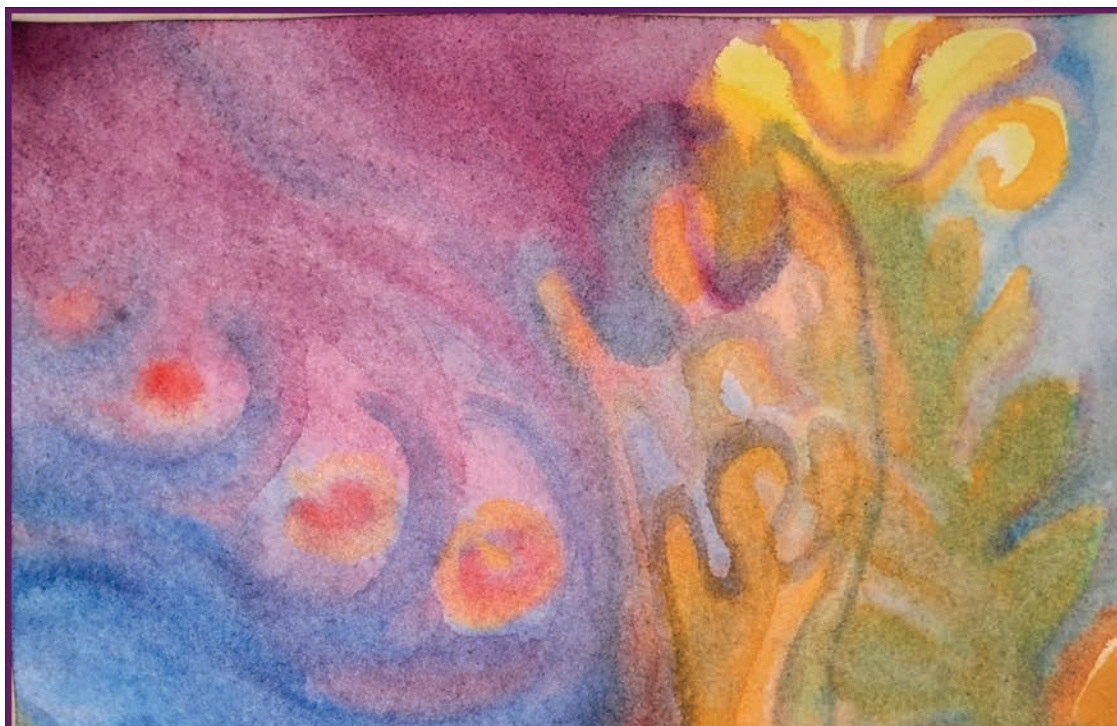
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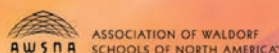
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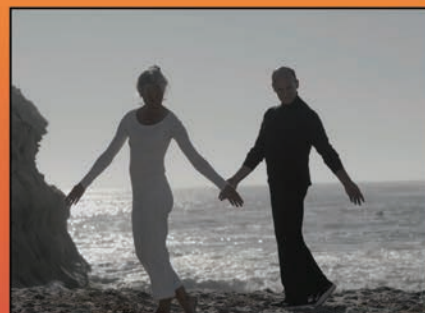
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education into the future!*

This 10-month low-residency certificate program offers experienced Waldorf teachers an innovative approach to supporting new and developing teachers in the classroom.

Participants will meet online for 2 hours one Saturday per month to work in collaboration with program faculty in all realms of Waldorf education: early childhood, grades, high school, and special subjects.

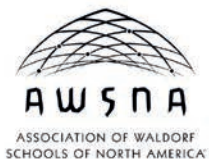
The program will begin on Saturday, January 26, 2026. The program includes a week long in-person residency from Sunday, June 28 - Friday, July 3, 2026.

Connect:

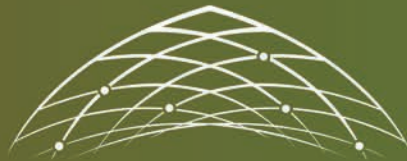
Karen Atkinson, Program Director
karen@centerforanthroposophy.org



**Preparing seasoned educators
to become mentors, coaches,
and professional evaluators in
support of new and developing
teachers.**



**Registration will open Fall 2025
Limited Seats Available!**



AWSNA

ASSOCIATION OF WALDORF
SCHOOLS OF NORTH AMERICA

ANNOUNCES THE PHOENIX CRISIS RESPONSE FUND

AWSNA has established the Phoenix Crisis Response Fund for Waldorf Schools and Institutes to provide timely financial assistance when schools face emergencies such as natural disasters, climate-related events, public health crises, or acts of violence.

This fund will offer short-term support to help schools and institutes recover, maintain their programs, and care for their students, teachers, and communities during times of disruption. The Phoenix Fund is sustained through ongoing contributions from within and beyond the Waldorf community, ensuring that help is available whenever and wherever it is needed.

Read more about the Phoenix Fund and how to contribute by scanning the code below. Or, contact Beverly Amico at: bamico@awsna.org



Phoenix
Fund



