

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. ♦

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