

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.*