

The Joys and Struggles of Growing a Home Kindergarten

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I am now entering my fifth year of teaching a small home kindergarten for three- to five-year-olds in America's heartland, St. Louis, Missouri. The joys of such an intimate program are myriad, coming down the stairs while still in my nightgown on a frosty winter morning to begin setting my bread sponge, knowing I will not be fighting rush hour traffic before beginning my teaching morning, having such a small group (eight children) that I can afford prolonged and multiple home visits with each family and the joy of witnessing the very young child blossoming in a group setting that is, in my opinion, just the right size. I teach three mornings each week in the four-hour rhythm that I used when I taught in larger schools. Since my health does not permit me to teach full-time, this part-time schedule allows me to continue serving in a meaningful way. I thought that it might be helpful to share a few of the lessons have learned upon my journey.

First, I am grateful for the years I spent teaching in two pioneer Waldorf schools in California. Without the form that became a part of me, I do not feel I would have been able to create my kindergarten as it now stands. This may not be so true for home kindergartens that stand under the umbrella of a thriving Waldorf school, but for those who are working in truly pioneering programs, some years of experience are invaluable. Since the school is in your home, it may appear to be only a home (although a warm and inviting one) to your prospective parents. There is no formal edifice to impress and reassure new parents; there is mainly your inner experience to attest that you are indeed a school and offering a genuine educational experience.

Second, I would only recommend the home kindergarten work to teachers who have deep confidence in their parent work. In a home kindergarten, I have not had colleague support when a challenge comes along; one truly is drawing upon inner resource and experience and the well should be deep. And even though I felt largely successful in my communications with parents while teaching in

schools, I have been surprised at times at the unexpected and more challenging situations that have arisen in the home setting. This past year, for instance, I had two children who had significant developmental delays. Both parents, who were friends, were distressed and in deep denial when concerns about the children were brought to them; both parents abruptly withdrew their children in mid-year that, in turn, was distressing to me since they were making real progress under my care. Again, in the home setting, there is no reassuring large community of adults to help allay the fears of an anxious parent; there are no other professionals to support your view of the child and the recommendations you are making.

In response to this difficulty, I formed an Advisory Board of past kindergarten parents and professional people to help advise me on creating policy and for general support. Two of the Board members offered to be present for challenging parent-teacher conferences to act as witness; I accepted gratefully since I had found a parent in deep distress is capable of behaving in a threatening manner. I had felt uncomfortable meeting two of the situations I have encountered in the last four years by myself.

These situations have highlighted a weakness in my program which I hope will be helpful to others: my kindergarten was so small and cosy, and I felt so confident in what I was offering that I began it with virtually no written policy. Did I truly need a parent handbook with only eight families? Yes, indeed, I did. I began with only a discipline policy statement that was required by my licensure. When issues arose over an aggressive child who was being exposed to a great deal of media, I added a television and media policy tied to the discipline statement which basically recommended no media but did not insist unless there were significant behavior problems, especially aggression toward other children. In my situation, I gather families who have never heard of Waldorf education before and attempt to meet them where they are and draw them

along, step by step. I do give them Marie McClendon's two books about media at the initial interview that lasts about two hours. Following are a few essential highlights from my new handbook (completed this last summer):

1) **Television and Media Policy:** I recommend no media; I clearly state that I feel Waldorf education, which keeps the children more open, does not mix well with the sensory bombardment of the media. I inform the parent that I will be presenting information about the effects of media and attempting to persuade them to protect their children until they are older; however, I leave them free unless there is a significant problem with disruption or aggression toward other children. Then I ask for full support or withdrawal of the child from the program.

2) **Parent Meeting Attendance:** I have made the decision to require parental participation at parent evenings and even have them sign an agreement to that effect at the initial conference. I found I had several families who seemed to want a drop-off program and were not interested in finding out more about what I was doing philosophically. I now explain at the initial conference that this education has some significant differences from mainstream early childhood education, and I would like them to be aware of the ideas, although I do not expect them to adopt them all as their own.

3) **Parental Screening:** As the administrator and teacher of a program, I have been tempted to accept families that I had initial concerns about simply because I needed the enrollment. Since these families have subsequently proven to be the most challenging, I have determined to cover several topics in an initial screening to determine parental openness. The above two topics are covered: willingness to consider working with media questions and wishing to discover more about the education through parenting classes. A third question I have decided is crucial is, "All children have struggles of one kind or another. Are you willing to work with me on resolving your child's developmental issues?" If there is any hesitation on this point, I do not accept the family into the kindergarten. I have found in my years of teaching that I am able to work with almost all children, but, for the ones with higher need levels, I need

acknowledgement from the parents that the child has issues to resolve and that I have the parent's full support in working with me upon them. This past year, I tried to work with the previously mentioned children without open discussion with the children's parents because the topic was too painful for them. I do feel like I helped the children, but I am unwilling to attempt the experience again without the open partnership with the parents; it was simply too difficult. The first month of school is a trial period after which the parents and I will assess the child's needs and whether together we will be able to meet them in my program. This allows me an opportunity to experience the child in the classroom setting and create some guidelines from the beginning of the year.

4) **Parent-Teacher Communication:** I have two formal parent-teacher conferences each year, one in the fall and one at the end of the year. I encourage parents to call me if they have concerns in between, but I have decided to limit the telephone conversations to about fifteen minutes. If the issue cannot be resolved in that time, then I arrange a face-to-face conference where we can sit down and address the concerns. I feel this makes for a more conscious communication and allows me time to prepare inwardly for a true meeting with the parent. In the past, I have spent hours on the phone with anxious parents; I feel I have to set firmer boundaries in a home setting than I did in the schools. The situation feels more intimate, and it is easier to cross into a friendship with the children's parents, but I find it is better to keep a bit of formality until the children have "graduated."

In conclusion, I would say that I have found this to be a wonderfully viable semi-retirement plan for Waldorf teaching. I would highly recommend it to experienced kindergarten teachers who find they cannot keep up with the demands of full-time teaching but still have the forces to work in a smaller way. I find I spend about thirty hours a week between teaching, preparation and administrative work, about half of the hours I gave to my school week; this gives me the three-day weekend I always longed for and most of the summer off to regenerate.