



The Kindergarten Child

Peter Lang

***Editor's Note:** Last year the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development announced the results of its Program for International Student Assessment, known as PISA. One of the results of PISA has been a demand on the part of politicians to call for the increased teaching of academic subjects and imposition of standardized testing at every age level. The kindergarten has especially been subject to these pressures. In contrast to these demands, Peter Lang addresses the unique needs of the preschool and kindergarten child.*

The kindergarten has come into the public arena. In the political debate about the consequences of the conclusions of the PISA study, the kindergarten is, in many cases, not understood as a place of development in which children acquire the essential, vital, basic skills needed as a foundation for future school learning. Time spent in kindergarten is often characterized as "cuddly education" and "wasted time." According to a series of articles about the new education catastrophe in Germany in *Der Spiegel* (a German weekly news magazine), the dogma remains that kindergarten involves only playing and no learning, and, that as a result, a kind of cultural malnutrition takes place. The call for beginning school earlier is becoming louder, and, at first glance, may even appear logical. However, logical does not always mean appropriate or just. For this reason, it is more urgent than ever that, in the immediate future, the developmental needs of

young children be highlighted and examined in order to see what requisites for kindergarten education emerge. At the same time, it can be shown that in Waldorf education, kindergarten is a time of thorough preparation for future learning in school and in life. Children are individuals who develop and who, with their talents, inclinations, interests, and also handicaps, want to go their own ways.

In order to facilitate this process in the best possible way, they need competent adult role models, loving and secure relationships, and their own rate of development. Children do not fit into the timetables of the adult world, nor do they fit into purposeful political or economic agendas. Children are capable of learning, joyful at learning, and ready to learn. Their developmental windows are wide open, especially in the preschool and first school years. That is where the responsibility arises for adults to shape the child's world in such a way that at least these three main components permeate their upbringing:

1. Comprehension: Children should and want to know and learn to understand the world in its interconnectedness; therefore, the methodology here should consist of simple and easily grasped

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associations that lead into the ever more complex.

2. Application: Children gain trust in their own growing powers and abilities primarily when they get many opportunities to do things themselves and master tasks themselves. When help is needed, it should, of course, be forthcoming.

3. Meaningfulness: Children should develop a sense of meaning in their own actions, feelings, and thoughts, step by step. That requires qualified role models in childhood and youth as an orientation and accompaniment on their path.

School-readiness should be determined by the actual physical and mental development of the child, and this is not necessarily in step with legal regulations or economic considerations. Before school readiness, it is not specific, testable knowledge that the child needs. Quite the opposite is true! The time before school, free from formal learning, allows for the development of basic skills on which later formal education and training can build. These skills make it possible for the future youth and adult to arrive at a position where he or she can master the demands of daily life in the best possible way. They are the requisite foundations for further specialization. Before school readiness, children neither need nor do they tolerate one-sided intellectualization. The same applies to so-called "cuddly education." Children need the mindful attention of parents and of well-trained educators to give them orientation. Only in this way can they find their own paths.

Waldorf Kindergartens as Skills Centers

Waldorf kindergartens have always been understood to be not just safe havens: They are intended to better the developmental conditions of each child and afford him or her a happy and learning-intensive childhood.

In Waldorf pedagogy, there are seven skills areas that are highlighted for children up to age six or seven:

1. Body and Movement

Scientists and teachers have established that more than half of all first-graders have problems with posture or balance, or are overweight. Many children suffer from lack of movement; their large motor and fine motor skills are insufficiently developed. But the human being's mental and spiritual orientation and balance correspond to his or her physical flexibility and mobility; those who cannot maintain physical balance usually have problems with mental balance. Also, the ability to move definitely influ-

ences the acquisition of speech. The ability to comprehend something and then go towards it permeates perception, widens the horizon of a child's experience, and activates the speech development process. Children who learn active, versatile movement are also preparing the way to more skillful thinking. That is why special attention is paid in Waldorf education to ensure that children get much varied physical movement. Regular walks, games, or gardening also belong in this domain of movement as do finger games and handwork (such as sewing or embroidery).

Tips on method: Perception of the body, development of bodily sense of self, and the motor and fine motor skills come about, for example, by walking, climbing, and jumping rope, gardening and kitchen work, by playing simple musical instruments, and doing simple woodwork such as building a bird-house.

2. The Senses and Perception

Virtual worlds are becoming epidemic. They present us with qualities that never occur in reality. In order not to fall for these deceptive images, we must depend on our senses more than ever. We need an enhanced perception skill. Our children require an alert consciousness for all that happens around them and to them. What develops is the trust in one's own power of perception. That is why dependable, unadulterated impressions are especially important in current times. Even media skills, which are desirable later, must be developed through a pedagogical foundation. "Media skill," according to Joseph Weizenbaum, an American computer expert from M.I.T., "means the ability to think critically. One learns critical thinking solely through critically processed reading and that is conditional on a high level of speech competence."

In the Waldorf kindergarten, children first discover and explore the real world with their senses and thereby get to know and learn to understand simple, perceptible connections. In this way, along with their own joy of discovery, they also gradually experience elementary laws of nature. Such fundamental requisites as these should be present, at the least, before children enter into more complicated, abstract connections. Therefore, computers or television in kindergarten can in no way promote media skills needed later.

Tips on method: Nurture the human senses by creating harmonious surroundings, among other things, with soothing blends of colors and materials, and by utilizing healthy, organic foods and natural materials.

3. Speech

Thinking and speaking are closely connected. We can express what we are thinking through speech. With speech we can express our feelings, give names to all things in the world, and enter into discussions with one another. However, this instrument requires early, active, and careful nurturing. Children learn to speak in a speaking environment. This depends, first of all, upon the personal relationship between those speaking and those listening. If a child perceives warmth of soul and language from the adults, then this enables the child to also develop good, clear speech. *When* a child begins to speak varies according to the individual. But all children need good speech role models in order to grow in their language.

Songs, stories, verses, finger games, and rhymes have an important place in a Waldorf kindergarten. The children playfully learn the language and become at home in it. The speech of the educator should, therefore, be loving, clear, imaginative, and age appropriate. Baby talk does not have a place here, nor does the use of abstract explanations.

Tips on method: Good speech role models, clear, vocabulary-rich and imaginative speech, songs, verses, finger games, rhymes, correct naming of things such as plants and animals, daily storytelling or reading from meaningful stories, fairytales, and so forth, allow the children to develop their language skills.

Take time to listen to them and do not correct their speech. From these activities, joy for reading and reading ability will emerge.

4. Imagination and Creativity

The paradox is omnipresent. All around us, more and more aspects of life are being standardized, prefabricated, and defined. On the other hand, human social development is unthinkable without imagination and creativity. Will we soon even still be capable of these two capacities? How do we acquire and maintain them? A wealth of ideas, mental/spiritual flexibility, and imagination are required of adults (and rightly so) to enable them to shape their lives and work, and kindergarten is the time to invest in the development of these faculties. Everything imaginative, everything artistic, vitalizes and expands the soul and consciousness of human beings.

Development and care of childhood imagination takes on concrete form in the Waldorf kindergarten. There are many non-standardized and "barely finished" toys that stimulate children's creative powers. Stories animate the children to translate what

they hear into play. Daily playtime is ample enough for the children to be concentrated and spur each other on to finding joy in activities.

Tips on method: Use toys and play materials that stimulate the imagination, such as rocks, boards, pieces of wood, large pieces of cloth, and scarves. Have regular playtimes in the forest or garden, with variations in games such as role playing and puppet plays. Tell inspiring and motivating stories that can then be translated into the children's play. The archetypal trade stories should be told and a relationship developed to them through play. Provide opportunities for pretending to be shoemakers, carpenters or tailors (the archetypal trades).

5. Social Ability

Social cohesiveness must be learned. Without social competence, the healthy life of an individual person and a society is inconceivable.

Children are social beings from birth and will studiously acclimate themselves to social relationships. These learning processes begin in the family and continue in the kindergarten. As more and more children are growing up in one-child families, often with only one parent, with the result that their social field of practice is limited, the kindergarten must thus now, more than ever, become the basis for social experience. Social interaction is always a matter of bringing the interests, desires, and needs of the individual into a relationship with the group or community. On the one hand, individuals must be able to bring their own abilities and intentions, and, on the other hand, the needs of everyone else should have a place. For this, rules, agreements, and trust are necessary. Children need communities in which they can orient themselves and learn as many of these social rules of life as possible.

A Waldorf kindergarten is such an environment. The children learn that there are rules as well as a structure-creating rhythm to the day and week that lead to single children or groups taking over certain tasks (such as tidying up or setting the table). The children orient themselves by imitating the teacher. Through this process, they also learn to take responsibility and to use their own creative space that has resulted and, at the same time, they get practice in useful activities.

Tips on method: Mixed-age groups offer opportunities for children to help each other. Help children to take over tasks such as rinsing the dishes, tidying the room, watering the plants. Foster social orientation by telling meaningful stories and through encouraging role playing father-mother-child, fire-fighting, hospital, store. Help children learn to give, receive, and share. Have children experience

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parents helping in the kindergarten, for example, repairing toys, organizing festivals, or doing renovation work. Practice solving conflict, for example, by apologizing when it is called for.

6. Motivation and Concentration

Today many children, youth, and adults suffer from nervousness, hyperactivity, and a lack of concentration. Their enthusiasm has been limited as well as their ability to connect themselves with certain activities for a given period of time. In science and education, the causative factors (pathogenesis) have long been sought and researched. At the same time, there has been an effort to get to know and strengthen the healthy and stabilizing factors (salutogenesis).

The Waldorf teachers' tasks are to identify habits and impressions that are harmful to the development of the small child and to keep them away from the child (for example, television at an early age). At the same time, their educational efforts are directed toward health-promoting factors. For instance, they recognize the young child's desire for learning and activity and stimulate that desire and the child's natural tendency to imitate through role modeling. Interesting and stimulating possibilities for activity have a motivating effect on the children. Regular repetition and rhythmic, creative elements in the daily kindergarten routine, as well as regular attention to seasonal changes highlighted with festivals, all, therefore, help the child to develop the ability to concentrate.

Tips on method: Encourage self-created play and have toys that stimulate initiative and offer manifold possibilities for play. Help children get to know processes from beginning to end and participate in them themselves (for example, in baking, laundry, and gardening). Help children experience appropriate activities having to do with adult daily life instead of unplanned, senseless, or unhealthy activities.

7. Ethics and Moral Values

In order to shape their own lives, children, like adults, need mental/spiritual orientation, values, and tasks with which they can internally connect. Children need rules, rituals, clarity, and truthfulness. They want to experience adults who are engaged and involved and can give them moral orientation without preaching. However, today many children find only the standards of a fun-and-recreation-oriented society in their surroundings without any supporting commitment.

Waldorf pedagogy consciously incorporates ethics and morals into its educational approach. It recog-

nizes that children need a supportive environment to absorb the good, beautiful, and true, just as they need respect for other people, other cultures, and nature. Children must also learn that the experience of respect, beauty, and truth is linked to personal engagement and involvement.

Tips on method: Prepare and celebrate festivals. Provide opportunities for loving contact with nature. Provide opportunities for practicing charity and "loving thy neighbor," gratitude (verse before meals), and helpfulness. Enable children to experience their parents' involvement in the community and in the kindergarten. Help them to learn respect for differences. Provide opportunities for hearing and singing songs and saying verses from other cultures.

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