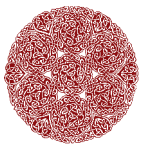
The Waldorf Kindergarten

The early years of childhood provide the foundation for a healthy life. Everything is important: the warmth of adults, the tone of voice, the aesthetics of the environment, to name a few aspects. This is the age when seeds are planted for a lifetime of adventure through learning. How this is brought to the child is crucial.

The following two essays by Waldorf educators provide a snapshot to help parents determine if this education is the appropriate one for their family. I say family because the two triangles of parent–child–teacher and home–classroom–professional educator should be in complete alignment.



What Young Children Really Need

The Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education

by Susan Howard

Is there a Waldorf early childhood curriculum? Are there activities—puppet plays, circle games, watercolor painting, for example that are specific to a Waldorf program?

Are there certain materials and furnishings—lazured, walls, handmade dolls, beeswax crayons, and other natural materials—that are necessary ingredients in a Waldorf setting?

What makes Waldorf early childhood education Waldorf? Rudolf Steiner spoke on a number of occasions about the experiences that are essential for the healthy development of the young child.

These include:

- love and warmth
- an environment that nourishes the senses
- creative and artistic experiences
- meaningful adult activity to be imitated
- free, imaginative play
- protection for the forces of childhood
- gratitude, reverence, and wonder
- joy, humor, and happiness
- adult caregivers pursuing a path of inner development

Love and Warmth

> Children who live in an atmosphere of love and warmth, and who have around them truly good examples to imitate, are living in their proper element.
>
> – Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child*

Love and emotional warmth, rather than any particular early childhood program, create the basis for the child's healthy development. These qualities should live between the adult caregiver and the child, in the children's behavior toward one another, and among the adults in the early childhood center. When Rudolf Steiner visited the classes of the first

Waldorf school, he often asked the children, "Do you love your teacher?"

Children are also served if this love and warmth exist in the relationships between the teachers and the parents, between the early childhood teachers and the rest of the school, and in the surrounding community.

An Environment That Nourishes the Senses

The essential task of the kindergarten teacher is to create the proper physical environment around the children.

> The physical environment must be understood in the widest sense imaginable. It includes not just what happens around the children in the material sense, but everything that occurs in their environment, everything that can be perceived by their senses, that can work on the inner powers of the children from the surrounding physical space.
> – Rudolf Steiner, *The Education of the Child*

Early learning is profoundly connected to the child's own physical body and sensory experiences. Everything the young child sees, hears, and touches has an effect. Thus a clean, orderly, beautiful, quiet setting is essential.

The physical environment, both indoors and outdoors, should provide varied and nourishing opportunities for self-education experiences in touch, balance, lively and joyful movement, and also inward listening. The children should experience large-group, small-group, and solitary activities.

The teacher, in integrating diverse elements into a harmonious and meaningful environment, provides surroundings that are accessible to the child's understanding, feeling, and active will. The care, love, and intention expressed through the outer materials and furnishings of the classes are experienced unconsciously by the child. The child experiences the immediate environment as ensouled and nurturing.

The adult shapes the temporal environment as well as the spatial. Through a rhythmic schedule, in which the same thing happens at the same time on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis, the child gains a sense of security and confidence in the world. Also, the different activities of the day should take place in a comfortable flow with smooth transitions.

Creative, Artistic Experience

> In order to become true educators, we must be able to see the truly aesthetic element in the work, to bring an artistic quality into our tasks. ... [If we bring this aesthetic element, then we begin to come closer to what the child wills out his own nature.
> – Rudolf Steiner, *A Modern Art of Education*

In the early childhood classroom, the art of education is the art of living. The teacher is an artist in how she perceives and relates to the children and to the activities of daily life. She orchestrates and choreographs the rhythms of each day, each week, and each season in such a way that the children can breathe freely in a living structure.

In addition, the teacher offers the children opportunities for artistic experiences in singing and music, in movement and gesture—through eurythmy and rhythmic games—and in creative speech and language—through verses, poetry, and stories. The children model with beeswax, draw, and do watercolor painting. Puppet and marionette shows put on by the teacher are an important element in the life of the kindergarten.

Meaningful Adult Activity to Be Imitated

> The task of the kindergarten teacher is to adapt the practical activities of daily life so that they are suitable for the child's imitation through play. … The activities of children in kindergarten must be derived directly from life itself rather than being 'thought out' by the intellectualized culture of adults. In the kindergarten, the most important thing is to give children the opportunity to directly imitate life itself.
> – Rudolf Steiner, *The Child's Changing Consciousness*

Real, meaningful work with a purpose, adjusted to the needs of the child, is in accordance with the child's natural and inborn need for movement and is an enormously significant educational activity. The teacher focuses on the meaningful activities that nurture life in the classroom 'home,' such as cooking and baking, gardening, doing laundry and cleaning, creating and caring for the materials in the immediate environment, and taking care of the bodily needs of the children.

This directed attention of the teacher creates an atmosphere of freedom in which the individuality of each child can be active. It is not intended that the children just copy the outer movements and actions of the adult, but that they experience also the inner attitude—the devotion, care, sense of purpose, focus, and creative spirit of the adult.

Free, Imaginative Play

In the child's play activity, we can only provide the conditions for education. What is gained through play, through everything that cannot be determined by flxed rules, stems fundamentally from the self activity of the child. The real educational value of play lives in the fact that we ignore our rules and regulations, our educational theory, and allow the child free rein.

– Rudolf Steiner, "Self Education in the Light of Spiritual Science"

Young children learn through play. They approach play in an entirely individual way, out of their unique configuration of soul and spirit, and out of their unique experiences of the world in which they live. The manner in which a child plays may offer a picture of how she will take up her destiny as an adult.

The task of the teacher is to create an environment that supports the possibility of healthy play. This environment includes the physical surroundings, furnishings, and play materials, the social environment of activities and social interactions, and the inner/spiritual environment of thoughts, intentions, and imaginations held by the adults.

Protection for the Forces of Childhood

Although it is highly necessary that each person should be fully awake in later life, the child must be allowed to remain as long as possible in the peaceful, dreamlike condition of pictorial imagination in which his early years of life are passed. For if we allow his organism to grow strong in this nonintellectual way, he will rightly develop in later life the intellectuality needed in the world today.

– Rudolf Steiner, *A Modern Art of Education*

The lively, waking dream of the young child's consciousness must be allowed to thrive in the early childhood group. This means that the teacher refrains as much as possible from verbal instruction. Instead, her gestures and actions provide a model for the child's imitation. Familiar daily rhythms and activities provide a context in which the need for verbal instruction is reduced. Simple, archetypal imagery in stories, songs, and games provides experiences that the children can internalize but that do not require intellectual or critical reflection or explanation.

Gratitude, Reverence, and Wonder

If, during the first period of life, we create an atmosphere of gratitude around the children, then out of this gratitude toward the world, toward the entire universe, and also out of thankfulness for being able to be in this world, a profound and warm sense of devotion will arise ... upright, honest, and true.

– Rudolf Steiner, *The Child's Changing Consciousness*

Early experience of gratitude is the basis for what will become a capacity for deep, intimate love and commitment in later life, for dedication and loyalty, for true admiration of others, for fervent spiritual or devotion, and for placing oneself wholeheartedly in the service of the world.

Joy, Humor, and Happiness

If you make a surly face so that a child gets the impression you are a grumpy person, this harms the child for the rest of his life. What kind of school plan you make is neither here nor there; what matters is what sort of person you are.

– Rudolf Steiner, *The Kingdom of Childhood*

The teacher's earnestness about her work and her serious striving must be balanced with humor and a demeanor that bespeaks happiness. There must be moments of humor and delight in the classroom every day.

Adult Caregivers on a Path of Inner Development

For the young child before the change of teeth, the most important thing in education is the teacher's own being.

– Rudolf Steiner, *Essentials of Education*

Young children need time in nature to experience wonder and joy there. Just think what feelings arise in the soul of the early childhood educator who realizes: What I accomplish with this child, I accomplish for the grown-up person in his twenties. What matters is not so much a knowledge of abstract educational principles or pedagogical rules . ... [W]hat does matter is that a deep sense of responsibility develops in our hearts and minds and affects our worldview and the way we stand in life.

– Rudolf Steiner, "Education in the Face of the Present-day World Situation"

Here we come to the spiritual environment of the early childhood setting: the thoughts, attitudes, and imaginations living in the adult who cares for the children. The invisible realm that lies behind the outer actions of the teacher has a profound influence on the child's development.

The spiritual environment includes recognition of the child as a threefold being—of body, soul, and spirit—on a path of evolutionary development through repeated Earth lives. This recognition provides a foundation for the daily activities in the kindergarten and for the relationship between adult and child.

Such an understanding of the nature and destiny of the human being comes out of the inner life of the adult, the life of the individual Ego. This is a realm that is largely hidden, and hence is difficult to observe directly and to evaluate objectively. Yet ultimately this realm may affect the development of the children most profoundly. It is not merely our outer activity that influences the growing child. What lies behind and is expressed through this outer activity is also crucial. Ultimately, the most profound influence on the child is who we are as human beings and who we are becoming and how.

Conclusion

The 'essentials' described here are qualitative in nature. For the most part, they are not part of a body of concrete 'best practices.' Instead, they concern inner qualities and attributes of the teacher that foster healthy development in young children. These qualities can come to expression in a wide variety of ways, according to

- the age range of the children in the group and their individual characteristics;
- the nature of the particular program—a kindergarten, playgroup, or extended care program; and
- the environment and surroundings—urban or rural, home or school or child care center.

Many practices that have come to be associated with Waldorf/Steiner early childhood education—certain daily rhythms and rituals, play materials, songs, stories, even the colors of the walls, the dress of the adults, and the menu for snack—may be mistakenly taken as essentials. The results of such assumptions can be surprising, even disturbing—a 'King Winter' nature table appearing in a tropical climate in 'wintertime,' or dolls with pink skin and yellow hair in a kindergarten where all the children are brown-skinned and black-haired. Such practices may express a tendency toward a doctrinal or dogmatic approach that is out of touch with the realities of the immediate situation and instead imposes something from 'outside.' There is a parallel concern at the other end of the spectrum from the doctrinal or dogmatic. The freedom that Waldorf education offers each individual teacher to determine the practices of her early childhood program can be misinterpreted to mean that anything goes, according to personal preference and style. Here too, there is a danger that the developmental realities and needs of the children are not sufficiently taken into consideration. Each of these one-sided approaches may be injurious to the development of the children. As Waldorf early childhood educators, we are constantly seeking a middle, universally human path between polarities. Rudolf Steiner's advice to the first Waldorf kindergarten teacher, Elizabeth Grunelius, in the early 1920s, can be paraphrased as follows:

- Observe the children.
- Actively meditate.
- Follow your intuitions.
- Work so that all your actions are worthy of imitation.

Today, those of us who work with young children in a Waldorf environment are challenged to engage in a constant process of renewal. We must actively observe the children in our care, carry them in our meditations, and seek to work consciously and artistically to create the experiences that will serve their development. Our devotion to this task awakens us to the importance of self-education and transformation in the context of community. Our ongoing study of child and human development, our own artistic and meditative practices, and our work with anthroposophy, independently and together with others, become essential elements for the practice of Waldorf early childhood education. Here we can come to experience that we are not alone on this journey. We are supported through our encounters with one another and through our sharing of insights, experience, and knowledge. We are helped also by those spiritual beings who are committed to our continued development and to the renewal of culture that Waldorf education seeks to serve.

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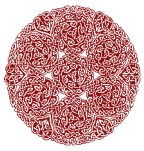

Strengthening the Foundational Senses of the Young Child

by Nancy Blanning and Laurie Clark

Many of us who work with young children have noticed that in recent years children have changed in ways that concern and alarm us. More children today are showing physical and social difficulties than we have seen in the past.

In preschools and kindergartens, many children, for example, are thin, pale, and chronically tired. They are nervous, cannot sit still, and are so fidgety that they often fall off their chairs. Movement and play do not come as easily as they once did. Many children are uncoordinated in their movements and seem clumsy. Some move with unconscious and uncontrolled abandon, smashing and crashing into their playmates. Others find a quiet corner and just stay there, avoiding movement at all cost. "Touchiness"—overreacting to the slightest brush against another child—emotional fragility, and difficulties with eating are also common. Many children reject the wholesome, simple foods that are prepared for snack and prefer instead only a few, often highly refined, foods.

Many young children also have trouble listening and processing what they hear. During circle time, the central event in the kindergarten morning, they are distracted and have trouble imitating the teacher's gestures. And when during story time the children are offered nourishment of soul and spirit, some among them cannot inwardly create the mighty imaginative pictures contained in the stories.

Children generally also show an increased difficulty in interacting harmoniously with their classmates. The peaceful and healthy hum of free play that once characterized each day in the kindergarten is now difficult to create and sustain. In the past, children were more able to create play from their own imaginations. Now they imitate characters from the media. But the roles and the behaviors do not in fact relate to real human relationships, and conflicts and problems arise.

Taken together, these phenomena indicate that children are having difficulty in developing a healthy balance in body, mind, and soul through integration of the senses described above. They lack the basic sense of well-being and harmony in their physical bodies that should characterize a healthy childhood.

According to Rudolf Steiner, the human being has twelve senses. Four can be called the foundational senses. These are the sense of touch (the tactile sense); the sense of life; the sense of self-movement (the propioceptive sense); and the sense of balance (the vestibular sense). It is by means of these that the soul and spirit of the child find their way into the structured physical body.

The **tactile sense** is the first to be awakened. This happens in the birth process itself when the mother's uterine contractions massage the fetus, giving it a first strong, external stimulus and awakening and toning the sense of touch. A very short labor, a Cæsarean section, or a postpartum period spent in an incubator can result in an oversensitivity in the infant and young child. For this child, a normal tactile experience can be like an assault, and the child will avoid the exploration of the world through touch that is part of the development of the infant and toddler. He is often finicky about the fit of his clothes. about being touched, and about the temperature and textures of food.

Sometimes the tactile sense is overtaxed as in a long and stressful labor. Then the child's sense of touch closes down in a gesture of self-protection. This child can be unaware she has touched another child, that her hands are encrusted with sand and mud, or that her shoes are on the wrong feet. As Steiner points out, touch gives us an experience of our boundaries, telling us where we end and where the rest of the world begins. A healthy sense of touch lays the foundation for a sense of social boundaries.

The **sense of life** tells us whether our basic physiological processes, such as those involved in eating, sleeping. breathing, and eliminating waste products, are functioning properly. When things are going well, we are usually unaware of this sense and what it is monitoring. When there is a problem, the life sense creates the feeling of being out-of-sorts or unwell. Aches and pains, problems related to sleep and to waking up, to eating (indigestion, food allergies, inability to tolerate a variety of foods), register on the life sense. Predictable rhythm In daily life and warm interest from the child's caregiver support the life sense.

The **proprioceptive sense**, or sense of self-movement, tells us about the position and

movement of our body. In each moment it informs us of the location in space of the head, trunk, and limbs and how they relate to each other. It does so by sensing the contraction and stretching of muscles and the compression of joints.

A child with a poorly developed proprioceptive sense may move through a room like a tornado, bumping into people and things. He may love to be at the bottom of a pile of other children. The external stimulus gives him the experience of body position and physical boundaries that his own proprioceptive sense fails to indicate. Such a child can be truly unaware of where his limbs are and how they are moving. He can be sincerely incredulous that with a swing of his arm he has just knocked down a block house that other children have spent twenty minutes building.

Healthy proprioception also provides the ability to begin a movement, to control it, and to stop it. This sense of self-movement enables us to maintain the right amount of muscle tension for a task such as lifting a glass of water. It also allows us to stand upright. A child with a poor sense of self-movement finds keeping an upright posture difficult and may collapse on the floor when the opportunity presents itself, as during circle time. A child, then, who is clumsy, who often bumps into things and other persons, and who readily slumps or just falls down, may have difficulty with the proprioceptive sense.

The **sense of balance**, or the vestibular sense, informs us of our position in space in relation to gravity. Working together with the proprioceptive sense, the sense of balance tells us where we are in relation to our surroundings and keeps us in balance, upright in space.

The vestibular sensory organs—the semicircular canals—are located in the inner ear. Ear infections, often chronic in nature, are very common among young children today, having replaced measles, chicken pox, and other inflammatory diseases that are now prevented by vaccines. Thus, both the vestibular sense and the sense of hearing are under attack. Some antibiotics used to fight ear infections may actually damage the inner ear and the semicircular canals.

Children with vestibular weakness are usually one of two extreme types. One type is very sensitive to movement of every sort and avoids spinning around, swinging, and being upside down. The other craves movement at all times. A child of this type can spin round and round on the tire swing and never get dizzy. She seems to need constant motion, always fidgeting and rocking in her chair. The vestibular sense in these children is underresponsive and thus needs a constant stream of stimuli to determine where the child's center of balance is. This child may also be the daredevil who lacks an appropriate sense of caution.

The importance of this sense of balance cannot be overemphasized. It is a unifying element in the whole system and seems to prime the entire nervous system to function properly.

The healthy development of these four senses in the young child provides the foundation for all the higher-level skills—cognitive, social, spiritual—in childhood and throughout life. When the foundational senses are functioning well, the child has pleasure and joy in being within his/her body. He moves in a balanced, coordinated, integrated way. He is eager to explore the world and new sensory experiences, and is not timid. The child is well-balanced, both literally and metaphorically, and also understands social boundaries.

In fact, however, many and increasing numbers of children lack the healthy development of these four senses. The incarnation into the physical body through the four foundational senses has been disrupted, and the harmony of young children's movement and behavior is disturbed. There are various explanations for this. Audrey McAllen, founder of the "The Extra Lesson," a method that is used widely in Waldorf schools for dealing with learning, behavioral, and other problems, cites the constant and powerful sensory stimulation to which today's children are subjected.

Well-known author Joseph Chilton Pearce elaborates this view by describing the "startle effect" and its use by the mass media. Pearce writes that children are essentially catatonic while watching television—and thus not really paying attention to the program or to the commercial breaks. Television producers therefore inject loud, unexpected, noises and sudden changes in volume and lighting into the programs to shock the child (and adult) back into an attentive state. These powerful stimuli cause the sympathetic nervous system to release an adrenal hormone usually secreted only in emergency situations. Cortisol quickens the heart and breathing rates, increases muscle tension, and prepares the child for fight or flight. Thus, children who spend time in front of a television are relentlessly bombarded with powerful sensory stimuli that keep them in a state of arousal. Music videos, movies, and computer games also contribute to this chronic

overstimulation. Pearce sees media as one cause of the anxiety and sensory disorders that plague children today.

The extreme sensory stimulation a child encounters in electronic entertainment prepares him for a crisis situation in which responsive action is needed. Since no such situation ensues, the child's body begins to take a certain level of cortisol as normal. What once aroused the fight or flight response (and woke him up for the commercials) becomes inadequate. Thus, in recent years the creators of electronic entertainment have steadily increased the speed at which the images change, the volume of the sound effects, and the shock quality of the images themselves.

The lack of opportunities for movement, especially free, spontaneous physical movement, also affects children negatively. Rather than walking or riding a bicycle to school and to visit friends, children today are chauffeured here and there by parents. Because of safety concerns, children are unlikely to enjoy unsupervised play and exploration with friends in the neighborhood. They spend much time being entertained passively by television, movies, videos, and computers. Most are spared the daily chores and household tasks that in an earlier age trained and strengthened the foundational senses.

The daily activities in the Waldorf kindergarten all work to strengthen these primary senses. The periods of free play; the rhythmic games that involve clapping and stomping the feet and other bodily movements; the acting out in gesture of events in the stories told by the teacher; and the participation in the chores and household activities that take place in the kindergarten, such as sweeping, washing dishes, setting the table for snack, and kneading bread dough, all promote the child's coming into the physical body in a healthy way. Each of these elements in the daily sequence of activities is enhanced by the teacher's warm enthusiasm and by the beauty of the classroom.

Many kindergarten teachers augment these standard Waldorf activities with special movement experiences. These teachers have the children do a series of movements within an imaginative pictorial context. The imaginations give the movement a power and meaning and carry that movement deep into the child's being. These imaginatively enriched movements have a more profound effect than do straightforward calisthenics or physical therapy and can be therapeutic as well as hygienic.

For example, a kindergarten class might be told the story of "Tippery Tim and the Pot of Gold." Tippery Tim is a leprechaun who is guarding a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. The class goes on a journey to find Tippery Tim. The children crawl under the roots of an imaginary tree to look for him, walk over a bridge (an elevated balance beam), run under a waterfall (a turning jump rope), and roll down from the top of the rainbow (do log rolls down gym mats arranged to create a small hill) before finally finding the gold. This is done each week over a term, and each week Tippery Tim has a small treasure in his gold pot for each child—a crystal, a star, and finally bells like the ones the leprechaun wears on the toes of his shoes.

There are things parents can do to help their children develop these foundational senses in a healthy way. These include:

- holding to a daily predictable rhythm and pattern that mealtimes, bedtime, and the times for other important daily activities are consistent;
- providing opportunities for free play and exploration indoors and out;
- taking children frequently and regularly for walks and outings in nature, regardless of the weather;
- encouraging the playing of games that involve running, jumping, skipping, balancing, crawling, and hopping (traditional children's games such as hide and seek, hop scotch, and jump rope are ideal);
- avoiding exposure to the media, particularly television, videos, and computers;
- encouraging children to eat a wide range of wholesome foods.

Today's culture is filled with threats to the healthy unfolding of the foundational senses in the young child. But if we are conscious of these hazards, we can nevertheless give our children a sound physical basis for life in the world and insure their development into healthy adults.

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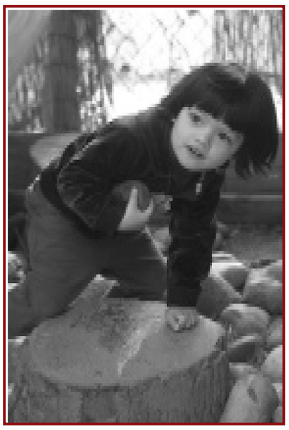

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