

## The Waldorf Kindergarten

Often the first remark of a visitor to a Waldorf kindergarten is, "it's so beautiful." And indeed the first task of the Waldorf kindergarten teacher is to create surroundings of beauty for the child, an environment that bespeaks a warm, loving, and secure place. She takes great care in the arrangement of the room, and in the choice of toys, colors, materials and natural objects, which beautify it.

In a typical Waldorf kindergarten, baskets of pinecones, shells, little wooden figures, large and small blocks and cut logs for building fill shelves around the room. There are also large, moveable play frames, cloths, crowns, capes, hand-made dolls and sets of small dishes. These help the children create a house, market, theatre, spaceship or whatever else inspires their fancy and imagination. There are also child-sized tables and chairs. During playtime these might be on top of one another forming a high tower. At snack time though, each table is in its place with a small vase of flowers in its center.

There are various focal points in the room. One might be the "season" or "nature table", draped with silk and adorned with gifts of nature appropriate to the time of year and to the location of the school. Often collected by the children, these may include acorns, pine cones, autumn flowers and leaves on red and rust colored silk for Fall; tree branches, dried flowers and crystals against blue and white for Winter; a budding Forsythia branch against shades of green for Spring, perhaps hung with dyed eggs and encircled by little gardens of grass. A candle lit to mark the beginning and end of story time might also be appropriate there.

Another focal point might be the kitchen area with jars and tins neatly arranged on shelves; tubs for washing dishes or dolls clothes; little dust pans and brooms hung low on the wall; ceramic crocks filled with utensils and measuring spoon. In the kindergarten everything is part of everyday life and most items are in reach of the children. The room has a balance of color, simplicity and purpose.

In addition to developing a beautiful environment, the kindergarten teacher must provide a curriculum appropriate to the child's stage of development. According to Rudolf Steiner, the child learns by imitation during his or her first seven years. To facilitate the child's innate imitative abilities the kindergarten teacher spends much of the morning engaged in various activities - baking or cooking the week's snacks, slicing fruit, washing dishes, sewing, fixing a toy or working on seasonal crafts such as stringing corn for necklaces at Thanksgiving or planting a garden in Spring. The children will see, watch and imitate the teacher in one of several ways. They may want to do what the teacher is doing. Thus a teacher who is sewing may suddenly find herself surrounded by a group of little aspiring tailors whom she will supply with pre-threaded needles, pre-cut squares of cloth and the bits of wool which they will need to make a cloth puppet like her own. Each child will think, if not shout, "Look, I can sew!"

Other children may imitate the teacher's work in their own fantasy play. So while the teacher bakes a loaf of real bread some children will "bake" a make-believe birthday cake in their own "kitchen." Also, the children will imitate the purposefulness and focus of the teacher in this and other activities. Well aware of this, the Waldorf kindergarten teacher strives to perfect not only her skills but also her appearance, gestures and poise.

During the child's early years their activity is of prime importance. Preschoolers are naturally active because their rapidly growing bodies require activity for healthy development. Unfortunately many toys today require moving only the hands or even just one finger. Most of the toys in a Waldorf kindergarten encourage the large-scale play in which the children are involved all morning.

Young children are gifted with a capacity for a rich imaginative life and this gift is encouraged and protected in a Waldorf kindergarten. Unfinished toys such as an unpainted wooden car or a cloth doll without specific facial features allow the child's imagination to fill in the details. Rather than always reading from an illustrated book, telling a story allows the children to create their own inner pictures.

Rudolf Steiner stressed the importance of rhythm as the "carrier of life." Children need familiarity and predictability and the Waldorf kindergarten provides this. A daily rhythm is established in a pattern of, for example, indoor play, cleanup, circle time, snack, outdoor activities and story time. The children always know what to expect and thus experience a sense of order and security in their often-busy lives. There is a weekly rhythm formed by having a special activity for each day, for example, baking on Monday, sewing on Tuesday, etc. Seasonal stories and crafts, the nature table, the celebration of festivals and of the children's birthdays creates a yearly rhythm.

Academic performance is not stressed in the early childhood years. It is felt that such expectations would harm the natural unfolding of the qualities and capacities of the young child. Activities that prepare them for learning fill the curriculum. Circle and story time develop language, listening skills and memory, and along with creative play, strengthen the imagination. Songs, nursery rhymes, stories and puppet shows cultivate an appreciation for language. Counting games and rhythmic activities provide a foundation for learning numbers. Beeswax modeling, crayoning, painting and finger-plays develop fine motor skills. Indoor and outdoor play and all the household activities develop large motor skills. The animal stories and the nature table cultivate an interest in and sense of wonder at the natural world, and prepare for an appreciation of the sciences. Rudolf Steiner's teachings touch many areas including science, philosophy, agriculture, medicine and the arts as well as education. He sought to reconnect humankind to earth's rhythms, to reawaken mutual understanding and respect and to rekindle a spiritual awareness in everyday life. These aims inform all the practical, artistic and academic activities in a Waldorf school, from the kindergarten through the high school years.

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