

Waldorf Education: An Introduction

What is Waldorf Education?



Teachers in Waldorf schools are dedicated to generating an inner enthusiasm for learning within every child... allowing motivation to arise from within and helping engender the capacity for joyful lifelong learning.

For the Waldorf student, music, dance, and theater, writing, literature, legends and myths are not simply subjects to be read about, ingested and tested. They are experienced. Through these experiences, Waldorf students cultivate a lifelong love of learning as well as the intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual capacities to be individuals certain of their paths and to be of service to the world.

Developed by **Rudolf Steiner** in 1919, Waldorf Education is based on a profound understanding of human development that addresses the needs of the growing child. Waldorf teachers strive to transform education into an art that educates the whole child—the heart and the hands, as well as the head.

When you enter a Waldorf school, the first thing you may notice is the care given to the building. The walls are usually painted in lively colors and are adorned with student artwork. Evidence of student activity is everywhere to be found and every desk holds a uniquely created main lesson book.

Another first impression may be the enthusiasm and commitment of the teachers you meet. These teachers are interested in the students as individuals. They are interested in the questions:

- How do we establish within each child his or her own high level of academic excellence?

- How do we call forth enthusiasm for learning and work, a healthy self-awareness, interest and concern for fellow human beings, and a respect for the world?
- How can we help pupils find meaning in their lives?

"When children relate what they learn to their own experience, they are interested and alive, and what they learn becomes their own. Waldorf schools are designed to foster this kind of learning."

—**Henry Barnes**, a longtime Waldorf teacher and the former Chairman of the Board of AWSNA

Teachers in Waldorf schools are dedicated to generating an inner enthusiasm for learning within every child. They achieve this in a variety of ways. Even seemingly dry and academic subjects are presented in a pictorial and dynamic manner. This eliminates the need for competitive testing, academic placement, and behavioristic rewards to motivate learning. It allows motivation to arise from within and helps engender the capacity for joyful lifelong learning.

The Waldorf curriculum is broad and comprehensive, structured to respond to the three developmental phases of childhood: from birth to approximately 6 or 7 years, from 7 to 14 years and from 14 to 18 years. Rudolf Steiner stressed to teachers that the best way to provide meaningful support for the child is to comprehend these phases fully and to bring "age appropriate" content to the children that nourishes healthy growth.

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The Essential Phases of Child Development

The First Seven Years: Imitation



Waldorf schools provide a detailed, richly artistic curriculum that responds to and enhances the child's developmental phases, from early childhood through high school.

Apparently helpless in her mother's arms, the infant seems incapable of learning. In fact, the baby is at the most absorptive stage and totally open to external influences. From birth she learns to stand, to talk, and to think. Becoming able to stand upright, to speak, and to think are remarkable achievements in a period of three or four years. And the young child does this without benefit of formal instruction through a combination of latent ability, instinct, and, above all, imitation. Imitation is the special talent that characterizes the period up to the age of six or seven. The young child mimics everything in the environment uncritically—not only the sounds of speech, the gestures of people, but also the attitudes and values of parents and peers.

The Second Seven Years: Imagination

Toward the end of the child's first seven years, various changes take place. Teachers in Waldorf Education consider the most prominent physical change being the loss of the milk teeth. It is a fact well known by biologists that it takes seven years for the transformation of every inherited cell in the body. Now, for the first time in her life, the child is wholly herself. This is manifest as the child develops: on the one hand, a new and vivid life of imagination, and on the other, a readiness for more formal learning. She both expresses and experiences life through finely tuned and delicate feelings.

As the child moves through these years, the faculty for more sequential and logical thought begins to unfold. Yet careful handling is necessary, for while this faculty needs nurturing, the ability to be fully at home in the world of imagination remains the child's most vital asset.

The Third Seven Years: Truth, Discrimination and Judgment

By the third developmental stage—adolescence—the child is on a search for truth, and she begins to experience the power of her own thinking. Two other features are present in the adolescent psyche: a healthy, valuable idealism and a vulnerable sensitivity—about both one's own inner experiences and the unfolding, insecure sense of self. The adolescent psyche needs protection, and many youngsters from puberty onwards are energetic in disguising their inner condition. Girls may become coquettish, daring and defiant. Boys' defenses may take the form of sullen or introverted behavior, apparent unwillingness to communicate, or a withdrawal into a "cocoon." In any case, they often erect barriers for self-protection. The adolescent behind the barrier is constantly seeking a role model with qualities to emulate.

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Preschool and Kindergarten in the Waldorf School



The early childhood teacher nurtures the children's power of imagination particular to the age.

The early childhood teacher in a Waldorf school works with the young child first by creating a warm, beautiful and loving home-like environment, which is protective and secure and where things happen in a predictable, regular manner. Here she responds to the developing child in two basic ways.

Firstly, the teacher engages in domestic, practical and artistic activities that the children can readily imitate (for example, baking, painting, gardening and handicrafts), adapting the work to the changing seasons and festivals of the year.

Secondly, the teacher nurtures the children's power of imagination particular to the age. She does so by telling carefully selected stories and by encouraging free play. This free or fantasy play, in which children act out scenarios of their own creation, helps them to experience many aspects of life more deeply. When toys are used, they are made of natural materials. Pine cones, wood, cotton, silk, shells, stones and other objects from nature that the children themselves have collected are used in play and to beautify the room.

Sequencing, sensory integration, eye-hand coordination tracking, appreciating the beauty of language and other basic skills necessary for the foundation of academic excellence are fostered in the Kindergarten. In this truly natural, loving and creative environment, the children are given a range of activities and the structure that help them prepare for the next phase of school life.

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Grades 1-8



The children should not simply be taught to do artistic activities and manual skills, but they should be taught so-called "non-artistic" subjects imaginatively and artistically as well.

When the child is ready for first grade, it is appropriate to use the powers of understanding for more abstract matters, including writing, reading, and arithmetic. But, to the child, it is not simply the acquisition of knowledge that is important. The process by which this knowledge is learned, through the creativity of the teachers who become the "authors" of each subject, must meet the inner need in the child for true authority and provide a secure basis for the child to reach out in the world.



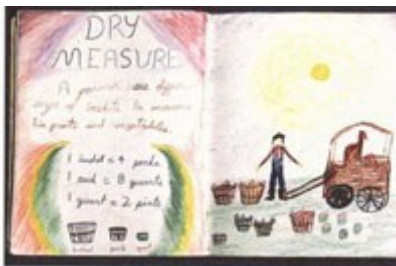
The Waldorf school responds to this need with a most remarkable offering: providing a Class Teacher as the key authority for the time between the "change of teeth" and the onset of puberty. Ideally, this teacher, though by no means the only teacher of the class, accompanies the children through all eight grades of elementary school. The Class Teacher's task is to guide the group of children during these important and impressionable years and to teach the class many of the curriculum subjects.

During these years—grades one through eight—the basic skills of literacy and numeracy are acquired. The children engage in a variety of cultural activities that cultivate the imaginative faculties—drawing, painting, poetry recitation, drama, singing, playing a musical instrument, and so on. During both the practical and cultural activities, however, the essence of the teacher's task is to work with his pupils with the imagination of an artist.



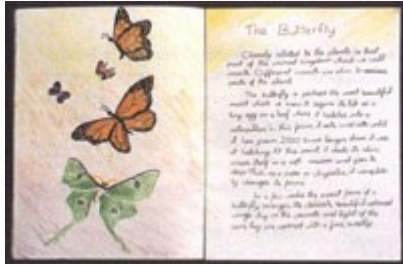
The children should not simply be taught to do artistic activities and manual skills, but they should be taught so-called "non-artistic" subjects imaginatively and artistically as well. This is true, though in widely different ways, in mathematics and grammar, carpentry and knitting, sports and foreign languages, all of which are part of the Waldorf curriculum. These cultural activities help the children build academic skills slowly, fortified with deep comprehension and understanding.

For example, in geography, the reality of the climatic zones of North America will be clearer to the child if the teacher can convey—artistically, descriptively, dramatically—the fresh, oxygen-rich air of the boreal forest of the North; the clammy, fetid thick air of the Everglades and the swamps of Louisiana; the rainy and snowy seasonal swings of the vast prairies of the Midwestern plains; the burning dry, mineral-rich deserts to the west of the Rocky Mountains; and the magnificence of the sequoias and redwoods standing tall in the saturating fog of the forests in the rainy Pacific Northwest.



The teacher appeals primarily to the feelings of the child between seven and fourteen. Indeed, the child is shaped more and led to deeper comprehension by the teacher's power and efforts as an "artist" than by the subject matter itself.

In the natural sciences, a sense of awe and wonder is cultivated from early childhood. Such a mood can arise, for example, when, while studying the human body, the children discover the vital relationship between the substance in the body—the bones—and the quickest of the cells—the red corpuscles—produced in the bones. It may arise when, in examining the modes of seed production in lower and higher plants, the children realize that there is an evolutionary sequence, a connected progression. This sense of awe and wonder will develop into a feeling of reverence, laying a firm foundation for a respectful treatment of the natural environment in later life. And it should underlie, yet never undermine, the critical faculties which the study of science in the later stages of education both requires and develops.



To support such an approach, all aspects in a Waldorf school—from the classroom furnishings to the way a poem is recited, from the pen a pupil uses to the exercises done in the gymnasium—are considered with two criteria in mind: they should be functional and they should be beautiful. For the child, this guarantees a caring authority that produces a stimulating effect on all his inner and outer senses.

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The Waldorf High School

In the high school, from grade nine through grade twelve, a new image of the adult stands in the young person's mind as an ideal. Truthfulness, thoughtfulness, self-possession, consideration, strong-mindedness, warm-heartedness—these are the qualities the adolescent holds as ideals. From around age fourteen, the student looks for such qualities in his teachers. No longer blindly accepting authority, he looks to a mentor who inspires him and who is clearly worthy of emulation.

The high school student also needs teachers who have devoted themselves to and mastered particular subjects or skills—the logic in mathematics, the control of the hand and sharpening of eye in metal-work and wood-carving or the development of bodily grace, control and expression in eurythmy and gymnastics.

Students will gravitate towards particular people and areas of study according to their individual preferences and talents. At the same time each student should continue to accept the discipline each subject demands and also appreciate the insights and broader perspective that an interdisciplinary approach makes possible.

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The Arts and Practical Skills



Arts and practical skills make their essential contribution, educating not only heart and hand but...the brain as well.

Waldorf teachers believe that the human being is not just a brain - but a being with heart and limbs - a being of will and feeling, as well as of intellect. To ensure that education does not produce one-sided individuals, crippled in emotional health and volition, these less conscious aspects of our human nature must constantly be exercised, nourished, and guided. Here the arts and practical skills make their essential contribution, educating not only heart and hand but, in very real ways, the brain as well.

The 6th grader who, as part of the class study of Roman history, has acted Cassius or Calpurnia, or even Caesar himself, has not only absorbed Shakespeare's immortal language but has learned courage, presence of mind, and what it means to work as a member of a team for a goal greater than the sum of its parts. The 9th grader who has learned to handle red-hot iron at the forge, or the senior who caps years of modeling exercises by sculpting a full human figure have, in addition to a specific skill, gained self-discipline and the knowledge of artistic form.

Students who have worked throughout their education with color and form; with tone, drama, and speech; with eurythmy as an art of bodily movement; with clay, wood, fiber, metal, charcoal and ink, (and, ideally, with soil and plant in a school gardening program), have not only worked creatively to activate, clarify, and strengthen their emotions, but have carried thought and feeling down into the practical exercise of the will.

When the Waldorf curriculum is carried through successfully, the whole human being-head, heart, and hands-has truly been educated.

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The Waldorf Curriculum

An Ascending Spiral of Knowledge



Each subject studied should contribute to the development of a well-balanced individual.

In the Waldorf grades, the school day begins with a long, uninterrupted lesson. One subject is the focus; the class deals with it in-depth each morning for several weeks at a time. This long main lesson—which may well run for two hours—allows the teacher to develop a wide variety of activities around the subject at hand. In the younger grades, lively rhythmic activities get the circulation going and bring children together as a group; they recite poems connected with the main lesson, practice tongue twisters to limber up speech, and work with concentration exercises using body movements.

After the day's lesson, which includes a review of earlier learning, students record what they learned in their lesson books. Following recess, teachers present shorter "run-through" lessons with a strongly recitational character. Foreign languages are customarily taught from first grade on, and these lend themselves well to these later morning periods. Afternoons are devoted to lessons in which the whole child is active: eurythmy (artistically guided movement to music and speech), handwork, or gym, for example. Thus the day has a rhythm that helps overcome fatigue and enhances balanced learning.

The curriculum at a Waldorf school can be seen as an ascending spiral: the long lessons that begin each day, the concentrated blocks of study that focus on one subject for several weeks. Physics, for example, is introduced in the sixth grade and continued each year as a main lesson block until graduation.

As the students mature, they engage themselves at new levels of experience with each subject. It is as though each year they come to a window on the ascending spiral that looks out into the world through the lens of a particular subject. Through the main-lesson spiral curriculum, teachers lay the groundwork for a gradual vertical integration that deepens and widens each subject experience and, at the same time, keeps it moving with the other aspects of knowledge.

All students participate in all basic subjects regardless of their special aptitudes. The purpose of studying a subject is not to make a student into a professional mathematician, historian, or biologist, but to awaken and educate capacities that every human being needs. Naturally, one student is more gifted in math and another in science or history, but the mathematician needs

the humanities, and the historian needs math and science. The choice of a vocation is left to the free decision of the adult, but one's early education should give one a palette of experience from which to choose the particular colors that one's interests, capacities, and life circumstances allow. In a Waldorf high school, older students pursue special projects and elective subjects and activities, nevertheless, the goal remains: each subject studied should contribute to the development of a well-balanced individual.

If the ascending spiral of the curriculum offers a "vertical integration" from year to year, an equally important "horizontal integration" enables students to engage the full range of their faculties at every stage of development. The arts and practical skills play an essential part in the educational process throughout the grades. They are not considered luxuries, but fundamental to human growth and development.

The Waldorf Curriculum for Grades 1-8

History, language arts, science, math, and history are taught in main lesson blocks of three to five weeks during the morning main lesson hours.

Primary Grades 1-3

Pictorial introduction to the alphabet, writing, reading, spelling, poetry, and drama. Folk and fairy tales, fables, legends, Old Testament stories.

Numbers, basic mathematical processes of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. Nature stories, house building, and gardening.

Middle Grades 4-6

Writing, reading, spelling, grammar, poetry, and drama. Norse myths, history and stories of ancient civilizations. Review of the four mathematical processes, fractions, percentage, and geometry. Local and world geography, comparative zoology, botany, and elementary physics.

Upper Grades 7-8

Creative writing, reading, spelling, grammar, poetry, and drama. Medieval history, Renaissance, world exploration, American history, and biography. Mathematics, geography, physics, basic chemistry, astronomy, and physiology.

Special subjects also taught are handwork: knitting, crochet, sewing, cross-stitch, basic weaving, toymaking, and woodworking. Music: singing, pentatonic flute, recorder, string instruments, wind, brass, and percussion instruments. Foreign languages (varies by school): Spanish, French, Japanese and German. Art: watercolor painting, form drawing, beeswax and clay modeling, perspective drawing. Movement: eurythmy, gymnastics, group games.

The Waldorf High School Curriculum

Ninth Grade

English: literature, English skills, grammar, composition, vocabulary, speech. Foreign

Language: Spanish, French, German or Japanese (varies by school). Math: algebra 1, probability and statistics, introduction to computer education. Science: chemistry, physics, biology, geography. U.S. History: early American history and government. World History: revolutions and history through art. Music: performing choir, orchestra, and jazz band or beginning instruments (varies by school). Art/Crafts: black and white drawing, woodworking, drama, calligraphy, clay (varies by school). Physical education and eurythmy.

Tenth Grade

English: literature, term paper writing, grammar, composition, speech, poetry. Foreign Language: Level II Spanish, French, German or Japanese (varies by school). Math: geometry and surveying. Science: chemistry, physics, biology and geography. U.S. History: the period 1789 through 1914. World History: ancient history, Greece, and the Far East. Music: performing choir, orchestra, and jazz band or beginning instruments (varies by school). Art/Crafts: drama, woodworking, block printing, weaving, clay, pottery, drawing, painting (varies by school). Physical education, eurythmy, health, keyboarding, and first aid.

Eleventh Grade

English: literature, composition, grammar, and vocabulary. Foreign Language: Level III Spanish, French or German. Math: advanced algebra, computer science (varies by school). Science: chemistry, physics, biology, biology lab. U.S. History: World Wars to the present. World History: Rome, The Middle Ages, and The Renaissance, music history. Music: performing choir, orchestra, jazz band or string ensemble (varies by school). Art/Crafts: bookbinding, clay, life drawing, drama, woodcarving (varies by school). Physical education, eurythmy.

Twelfth Grade

English: literature, review of English skills, word usage, vocabulary, composition, honors program. Foreign language: Level IV Spanish, German or French, Honors program and AP (varies by school). Math: trigonometry, pre-calculus and/or advanced math, AP. Science: Chemistry, physics, biology, Honors program and AP (varies by school). U.S. History: development of the 19th and 20th century economic theory from the rise of mercantilism to the present. World History: architecture, modern art, Third World nations, symptomatology. Music: performing choir, orchestra, Honors program (varies by school). Art/Crafts: clay sculpture, carpentry, jewelry, graphic design, metalwork, Honors program (varies by school). P.E. and eurythmy.