

Defining Waldorf Extended-Daycare Programs

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Last fall, as I was registering for the WECAN Early Childhood Association Conference, I asked myself; “Why isn’t there any attention given to, or workshops devoted to, kindergarten extended-day programs?” Are we really the illegitimate Waldorf education offspring that always gets swept under the rug? Telephoning Cynthia Aldinger, Director of Lifeways North America about my question, I received support and encouragement. I quickly organized a survey about kindergarten extended-day programs and contacted all of the Waldorf schools in the United States in December of 2003. I received many differing responses to the survey and enough interest to organize a brief meeting that took place immediately after the February WECAN Conference at Spring Valley.

The survey questions were the following:

1. Briefly describe the details of your program. Include how many children attend, the cost of your program, and daily rhythm schedule.
2. Share with us a few challenges in managing your program.
3. What is your rest/nap time like?
4. What particular area of your program would be benefited by other kindergarten providers’ suggestions or ideas?
5. In your opinion, how can we better serve the Waldorf community?

The meeting was attended by thirty-five conference participants, mostly from the East Coast and Midwest. This article grows out of that meeting and from what I personally believe are critical issues facing the Waldorf extended-daycare movement.

The four areas of interest and concern described below provide us with a good start in addressing how we can proactively define our

kindergarten extended-daycare programs. These are the issues that I came away with from the meeting and from my seven years of experience as a kindergarten extended-daycare provider.

Adopting the term “extended-daycare program”

I am avoiding using the words before-care and after-care because we have for too long been defined as an afterthought, as part of something that just happens after the morning. Oftentimes, after-care providers are the last to be hired for the upcoming school year. The term extended-daycare is a more accurate term since it oftentimes includes before-care programs. “extended-daycare” are words that acknowledge that the daily rhythm process continues into the afternoon.

Maintaining Rhythm in the Afternoon

Maintaining daily, weekly and seasonal rhythms is of utmost importance in developing healthy children—it is the context, the foundation that is at the core of Waldorf early childhood education. This acknowledgement and need for rhythm is an act of reverence for the cosmic and divine processes that often escape our attention. Rhythm is essential to all things that have life. (von Heydebrand, p.106) Rhythm is the balance between the life processes of rest and movement. (Gallardo, p.13) The children experience rhythm when they play outside and then line up to go in to eat their lunch. It is experienced when they make this noticeable transition between morning and afternoon, between getting dirty outside and cleaning up before lunch, between burning energy playing outside and eating lunch inside, between “breathing in” the busy morning activities and allowing the body physical restoration and the nervous system much needed rest during the

early afternoon rest time. The rhythm of a rest/nap time after lunch has been well documented by Lisa Gromicko in the article, "The Physiological Basis of Sleep." (Gateways, Fall 2002) She keenly points out that children who struggle with rest/nap time, those children who are generally wound-up, wakeful and irritable, are struggling with all of the symptoms of fatigue and sleep deprivation.

In our increasing multi-tasking, action-orientated, busy lifestyles, we can witness the corporate construction of childhood, as documented in the book *Kinderculture*, that is completely oblivious to the vital role of natural rhythms for young children. Maintaining a rhythmic afternoon is one area of my kindergarten extended-daycare program that I do not compromise. I learned this the hard way. I inherited a program that was essentially a drop-in program where everyday a different group of children attended that were registered on a monthly basis. It had the chaotic "rhythm" of a busy bus station rather than a warm and comfortable environment to rest, relax and creatively play. I discovered that it was impossible to create a nurturing atmosphere that allows a "breathing out" rest period in the early afternoon. Over the years, I have changed the program to signing up children for the whole school year with an option to change the schedule when school starts up again in January. This option has created a very stable rhythm that exists throughout the school year. We also have at our school a Tuesday/Thursday program that operates out of one of the kindergarten rooms and is not integrated into the Monday-Friday program. This not only secures a rhythmic flow within the program, but also demonstrates to parents the importance of maintaining a rhythmic schedule regardless of their busy and often changing work and social schedules.

Parent Education

The urgency of a rhythmic daily routine and the importance of rest/nap time brings up the issue of how do we educate parents to the core values of our program. It is great to write or talk to parents who may use the extended daycare program in the spring well before the first day of

school. The key point is to emphasize that the program operates under certain guidelines (whatever your school has) in order to maintain a healthy rhythm life for the children. I have found that many parents are anxious about how their child will do during rest/nap time.

Sometimes it takes just as much work to convince parents of the worth of rest as it does for children to actually feel comfortable during rest time. This anxiousness is often passed on to the children. "The Physiological Basis of Sleep" article is a great resource to pass onto parents. That article quotes Rudolf Steiner as saying that, "Before age nine, the most important thing is for children to learn to properly sleep." (Glockler, *Forces*, p. 47).

Be a professional worthy of imitation.

Rudolf Steiner in the article, "Walking, Speaking, Thinking—Imitation in a Bodily-Religious Way," stated that "what matters in a kindergarten is that children should have a harmonious relation to those who are in charge of them and that these people should behave quite naturally, so that the children are naturally led to imitate them." (*Understanding Young Children*, p. 11). We can ask ourselves: How do we make a gesture of rest? Are we at ease in silence? Are we ourselves resting during nap time? Are we breathing out? I consciously breathe out very noticeably during rest time and am able to totally relax after I have surveyed the children during that critical transition from wakefulness to restfulness. I have developed a system where I slowly turn off the lights in the room and the children know what is expected at each time junction. This helps in making a smooth transition from a busy, social lunchtime to a solitary quiet rest time. This transition time between lunch and rest time is critical and, hopefully, we can discuss this in detail at our next gathering. There may be plans to bring together kindergarten extended-daycare providers this summer. Please write or call me if you are interested in such a gathering.

Finally, as long as kindergarten daycare providers are not recognized by parents and colleagues as professionals in their work of caring for young children, we will struggle in

truly developing a stable rhythmic program that lasts from year to year. My position has developed into a full-time position at my school, and I have consciously chosen to be a Kindergarten Extended-Daycare Director for seven years now. I garden and teach outdoor education in the morning, have morning recess duty every day and direct a six-week summer camp at our school.

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