

The Kindergarten Child

by

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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 essential, vital, basic skills needed in order to have a foundation on which to build 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 can only be playing and no learning and, as a result, there is cultural malnutrition. Logically, the call for beginning school earlier is becoming louder. However, logical does not always mean appropriate or just.

As a result, it is more urgent than ever that, in the immediate future, the developmental needs of young children are highlighted and examined to see what requisites for kindergarten education emerge. As 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, 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 schedule of development. Children don't 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 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 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.

Until school-readiness (determined by the physical and mental development of the child and not necessarily in step with legal regulations or economic considerations) 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 provide for the future youth and adult to arrive into a position where he 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 any one-sided intellectualization. The same goes for “cuddly education.” Children need mindful attendance of parents and 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:

Body and Movement

Scientists and teachers have established that more than half of all first-graders have problems with posture, with overweight, or with balance. Many children suffer from lack of movement; their motor and fine motor skills are insufficiently developed. But the human being’s mental and spiritual orientation and balance corresponds to his physical flexibility and mobility. Whoever cannot maintain his physical balance usually has problems with his mental balance. Also, the ability to move definitely influences acquiring 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 to make sure children get much varied physical movement. Regular walks, games, or gardening also belong in this spectrum 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 birdhouse.

The Senses and Perception

Virtual worlds are becoming epidemic. They dangle qualities before us that never occur in reality. In order to not fall for these deceptive images, we must depend on our senses more than ever. We need an elevated 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, here go through a pedagogical foundation building. "Media skill," according to Joseph Weizenbaum, an American computer expert at M.I.T., "means the ability to think critically. One learns critical thinking alone through critically processed reading and that is conditional on a high level of speech competence."

Therefore, 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, paired 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 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 rooms, among other things, with soothing blends of colors and materials, and by utilizing healthy, organic foods and natural materials.

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 is how the child can 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 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 speak out. Take time to listen and do not correct their speech. From these activities, joy for reading and reading ability will emerge.

Imagination and Creativity

The paradox is omnipresent. All around us, more and more things 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 those two qualities? How do we acquire and maintain these skills? 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, i.e. 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. Use some guided play, such as pretending to be shoemakers, carpenters or tailors (the archetypal trades). The archetypal trade stories should be made known and a relationship developed to them through play; tell inspiring and motivating stories that can then be translated into the children’s play.

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, and as a result, their social field of practice is limited, then kindergarten must now, more than ever, become the basis for social experience. Social affiliation is always about 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 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 use their own creative space that has resulted and, at the same time, they get practice in useful activities.

Tips on method: Help each other within mixed-age groups; take over tasks such as rinsing the dishes, tidying the room, watering the plants; social orientation through listening to meaningful stories, role playing like father-mother-child, fire-fighting, hospital, store; learn to give, receive, and share; experience parents helping in the kindergarten, for example, by repairing toys, festivals, or renovation work; practice solving conflict, for example, by apologizing.

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 desire for learning and activity of the young child and stimulate that desire through role modeling and the child's natural tendency to imitate. Interesting and stimulating possibilities for activity have a motivating effect on the children. So regular repetition and rhythmic, creative elements in the daily kindergarten routine, as well as regular attention to seasonal changes highlighted with festivals, all help the child to develop the ability to concentrate.

Tips on method: Self-created play; toys that stimulate initiative and offer manifold possibilities for play; get to know complete tasks from beginning to end and try for themselves (for example, baking, laundry, and gardening); stimulation created by the interest of the teacher; experience appropriate activities having to do with adult daily life instead of unplanned, senseless, or unhealthy activities.

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 concept. It recognizes that children need a coordinated system to absorb the good, beautiful, and true just as they need respect for other people, other cultures, and creation. Children must also learn that the experience of respect, beauty, and truth is linked to personal engagement and involvement.

Tips on method: Orientating stories; preparation and celebration of festivals; loving contact with nature; practiced charity and loving thy neighbor, gratitude (verse before meals), and helpfulness; experience parents' involvement in clubs, politics, the kindergarten; learn respect for multi-cultural distinctions; hear and sing songs and verses from other cultures.

