

# The Role of Purposeful Work in a Waldorf Kindergarten

by Karen Smith

## Introduction

*Before I chose this topic for my paper, I felt that the time I spent outside with my class the previous year was aimless. I spent a great deal of time preparing for the activities to fill our time inside the class, but outside interests were always an afterthought. I spent that first year teaching following Waldorf pedagogy until I took the children outdoors, and then I slipped into a mainstream day care onlooker mode. This left me with an empty feeling regarding playtime as I began to wonder what other Waldorf kindergarten teachers did to promote pedagogical continuity throughout the day.*

*I began my search to find an answer to this problem by asking my Sunbridge Early Childhood classmates to describe the outside activities of the teachers at their schools. Although I did receive some wonderful ideas (which can be found in a compiled list later in this paper), I also found that this area was one in which many teachers struggle.*

*Of the ideas that I gathered, the idea of making a wooden spoon to use for cooking in our classroom appealed to me most. In our class, the children make wooden swords as an ongoing wood working project throughout the year, so for them to watch me also undertaking a woodworking project seemed a very appropriate activity to pursue.*

As Waldorf early childhood educators, one of our primary goals is to teach by example. Through our work, the children learn important lessons to prepare them for the academics they will begin in grade one. This teaching method is quite different from the trend in mainstream education today, where out-of-context abstract concepts provide the basis for all learning, and opportunities for shared work activity with adults are not available.

There is much work to be done in a Waldorf kindergarten. As the calm and steady focal point, the teacher places herself in the center of all the activity, projecting an attitude of purpose and enthusiasm for her work. Preparing the food, dusting, polishing, repairing toys, folding the laundry, washing the dishes, sewing, and mending are all jobs the children can learn to accomplish.

In all aspects, an important requirement of a Waldorf teacher is that her actions be worthy of imitation and filled with purposeful joy. The care with which an item is placed on a shelf, a door closed, or a chair moved is noticed and replicated by our young students. We must be consciously aware of the quality of our movements, for whether we like it or not, we will see the children mirror for us what we have presented to them as it emerges in their actions and play.

\_\_\_ The joy of the child in and with his environment must be reckoned among the forces that build and mould the physical organs. He needs people around him with happy looks and manner and, above all, with an honest unaffected love.

A love which fills the physical environment of the child with warmth may literally be said to hatch out the forms of the physical organs. The child who lives in such an atmosphere of love and warmth and who has around him really good examples for his imitations is living in his right element. One should therefore strictly guard against anything being done in the child's presence that he must not imitate.

—Rudolph Steiner, *Education of the Child*

Our daily work in the classroom inspires in the children an incentive toward industrious play. The meaningful tasks that a teacher performs can be better comprehended by children when those same gestures are experienced in their play as they explore how an activity is done. In today's mechanized world, most of the tasks that formerly were completed by humans are now done by machines. Children have little opportunity to see adults use their hands to wash dishes or bake bread. Objects that in days long ago would have been repaired are now thrown away and replaced. Observing the work of the adult engaged in meaningful activity serves to boost the energy of children, developing in them an I can do it attitude. According to Rudolph Steiner, "If before the seventh year children see only foolish actions in their surroundings, the brain will assume the forms that adapt it to foolishness in later life." The life skills that the kindergarten child learns in a loving and enjoyable way are essential as a foundation for their future experiences as a capable and responsible adult.

Sometimes the activities that must be completed in a classroom are not those we prefer to do, but rather those that need to be done. When children observe the perseverance of an adult completing a mundane task with as much reverence and pleasure as the tasks we do enjoy, it imparts the work ethic that all jobs can be done to a high standard—any job can be a job well done.

The rhythm of our work is comforting for our students. The child who exhibits a chaotic will may gradually become more harmonious upon finding an outlet to calm him through scrubbing, sawing, shaking butter, and other forms of physically challenging work. Meaningful work is a positive cure for aggressive behavior. Children who exhibit unfocused and uncontrollable behaviors may gradually be redirected into positively focused imitative behaviors, as the teacher's actions strengthen a child's emerging will. The teacher seeks opportunities to gently, but firmly, guide a child toward greater self-control and focused attention, without fear of failure. Those children who find transitions to be difficult find comfort and satisfaction in the expected repetition of a daily routine. When a teacher follows a set rhythm, the children can relax, as they have no need focus their energy and attention on worrying about what the teacher or the class will be doing next. They are carried peacefully along by the steady stream of the teacher's activity. When inviting a child to join in an activity, it should not posed as a question. Simply stating I need your help, rather than Would you like to help? builds up a child's self-confidence which will emerge in his future impulses of play. Helpful, is a high purpose, to which a child may have limited opportunities.

Children are always aware of what the teacher is doing. Whenever a new project or work activity is begun, they eagerly offer their interest and assistance. Even if they do not take an active role in helping, a child will

often contentedly play in the shadow of the teacher, occasionally checking in on the progress of the activity. The teacher must have logically thought the activity through in advance, including tidying up the work place, so as to have all the materials needed for the children to be easily integrated. She must remain calm and purposeful as she guides them in the task. It is not important that work be completed quickly with as little mess or effort as possible. What is important is that the child be surrounded with a sense of pleasure and respect for the work they have contributed. By allowing a child to participate in real and practical work, the child gains satisfaction and a sense of purpose as an essential and needed member of the group.

Adults are responsible for setting the mood of the children's play each day. When adults are engaged in meaningful and purposeful work, the children play in a much more imaginative, content, and focused manner. When we instead take an onlooker stance, the children feel the adult's eyes focused upon them, and as a result, they often become more agitated and chaotic in their play. When adults chat idly among themselves, the children also become idle and fussy.

If we can find ways of introducing activities to children which are not verbal and awakening, an inner connection can be made that affects the child on a deeper, subconscious level. Certainly our advanced planning and preparation in bringing imitative work to the children can imbue our actions with a more sensitive inner quality.

Most teachers are comfortable filling their time inside the classroom with purposeful work. The challenge many teachers experience is finding a balance between purposeful work and the need to keep constant supervision over the children while outside. It is indeed important that we always know what is going on with the children in our care, but at the same time, it is also important that the children not feel as if they are always being watched. Children take comfort in knowing their teacher is accessibly nearby, and when a teacher has the courage to trust that all will be well, the universe and the angels help make it so. Taking up a meaningful task which still allows the teacher to keep a watchful eye over the play ground maybe best for the salutogenic health of the children.

I have found that in my own work, on the days that I have not brought a project of some kind outside, the children continually run to me to settle their minor conflicts. Conversely, on the days when I am intent on a task of my own, they more frequently find ways to work out difficulties among themselves. Although I am busily working, I am always available, and I readily stop whatever I am doing to come to a child in need.

Undertaking a project that has a long time before completion teaches by example the value of perseverance and a job well done. This year, my long-term outside project was to carve a wooden spoon. At the beginning of the school year, I began carving a seasoned branch from an apple tree. Throughout the months as the shape of the spoon slowly emerged, I never directly answered the children when I was asked what it would become. Because it is much more interesting for a child to ponder the outcome of a project, "What do you think it might be?" was my reply. Their answers were

always quite charming. Some thought it might be a paddle for a boat, a sword, a hammer, a fork, or a walking stick. My response to their ponderings was, "Perhaps, but I am not sure yet what this tree wants to become." Only in the spring did a few children think it might become a spoon. At the end of the project, as it was becoming a real spoon before their eyes, the children were eager to have me finish it to use to serve our porridge. I was delighted in their excitement when we were finally able to utilize the spoon in the last weeks of class, completing the lesson that diligent work does indeed have purpose.

The children have regularly wanted to help me work on my project, which I allowed them to do using a safe 4-in-1 rasp. In our class each year, the children themselves work for many months to make a wooden sword of their own, so they are familiar with the use of a rasping tool. They were quick to say that the rasping work on my project was more difficult, which was due to the very hard apple wood I chose for this spoon. They also watched me struggle with a carving tool, which only I used. By observing an adult engaged in work on a difficult activity all year long, the children witness the effort and the rewards from persevering to complete a project. For a child to understand self-discipline and self-control, he must have first experienced and observed it in the striving adults around him.

In gathering ideas from others, I found that most teachers fill their outside time with sweeping, raking, and gardening. Teachers at urban Waldorf schools with limiting playgrounds must find different ways to accomplish many of the activities commonly undertaken at Waldorf kindergartens. Our play ground is rented from a strict church landlord, so the opportunities we have to garden and compost are minimal. However difficult it may be, working with the soil is an important task for adults to undertake. Through caring for our environment outdoors, we project through example a reverence for nature that fosters soul warmth within the children. Even planters filled with flowers offer children an opportunity to work with and care for the earth.

It is very beneficial for children to see something made from nothing. In watching an adult fashion an item such as a basket from nothing but vines, it sparks imaginative possibilities within children that should be nurtured at this young age.

The following list is offered as a seasonal spring board of purposeful work ideas. Some projects are meant for teachers alone and others are meant to be completed with the assistance of the children. These ideas offer a variety of ways to contribute to a child's understanding and their development of fine and gross motor skills.

Ideas for Purposeful Work Outside:

The following list was gathered from Waldorf kindergarten teachers around the world.

Those ideas noted with an \* indicate projects that are primarily done only by a teacher.

## Autumn

Wash napkins, placements, or other cloth items and hang on a clothes line to dry. The next day gather and fold.

Make a scarecrow from old clothes stuffed with hay. Have the children sew on buttons for the facial features.

Make a straw or vine wreath. Have the children help to decorate it seasonally.

Make leaf crowns and garlands for display in the classroom.

Build a leaf press, then gather leaves and flowers to press for use in future projects.

In corn season:

take off silks and turn husks down to allow fresh corn to dry for 2-3 weeks.

shell dried corn.

use husks to make dolls or wreaths.

Dry harvested gourds for one year to make Thanksgiving rattles.

Carve a pumpkin and save the seeds to plant in late spring.

Pick up pecans or other edible nuts to crack with a wooden mallet and eat.

Plant spring bulbs.

Harvest garden produce, herbs, or flowers for plant dying.

Plant-dye fabric for Michaelmas and other festivals.

Dry herbs to make tea, potpourri, scented pillows as gifts.

Thresh grain to grind for bread.

Rake leaves or the sand box.

Spread wood chips or mulch.

## Winter

Build and maintain a bird feeder.

String whole peanuts or apple slices for the birds.

Fill terra cotta flower pots with lard and sunflower seeds for the birds.

Build snow men.

Shovel snow for paths.

\*Cut ice blocks for igloos.

## Spring

Spread compost for new garden plantings.

Plant pumpkin, gourd, or other seeds.

Plant flowering plants, summer bulbs, etc.

Make flower necklaces and garlands.

Make horse reins using finger knitting and a felt chest cover.

Gather fresh moss for the nature table.

Wash windows with vinegar/water and dry with old newspaper.

Wash wool fleece. Use it for felting projects.

Help the children make a foot felting wall hanging for the classroom.

## Summer

Blow bubbles with a bubble pipe made from straws or hollow pithy twigs reamed out with a screw and cut into small pieces.

Wash outdoor tools, toys, furniture.

Create a large outdoor weaving using vines, flowers, yarn, roving, grasses, and other found objects.

Anytime of the year:

Weed the garden.

Water the plants.

Turn and sift compost.

Turn the jump rope.

Organize outside storage shed.

Cut corners from painting/drawing paper.

Untangle classroom ropes.

Pick up trash.

Clear the underbrush from a pathway in a forested area.

Build a tepee or hut in the woods with fallen sticks and vines.

Sweep walkways. Help the children to make little brooms by attaching pine needle clusters to a stick with yarn.

\*Make a broom.

Care for kindergarten animals.

\*Handwork: felting, sewing, knitting, crocheting, drop spindle.

Clean painting boards with nail brush.

Make a bench from two tree trunks and a plank nailed in place.

Make a chair from a tree stump by cutting a log from the top halfway, then from the side to form a seat. Sand till smooth, then finish with oil and beeswax polish.

Saw wood or branches.

Sand woodwork items and toys.

Sand cutting boards with fine sandpaper, then re-wax with beeswax paste.

Sand the wooden play structure when splinters are found.

Split logs with a hammer and wedge. Help the children to make a pretend hatchet from a stick and a large wood chip tied together with yarn.

Make clothes pins from split sticks wrapped with wire.

Mend toys, fences, furniture, etc.

Build fences or edges for a garden or pathway with branches or stones.

Build a climbing ladder.

Build a wheel barrow from planks and an old tricycle tire.

\*Weave baskets using vines cut from the forest.

\*Carve or rasp wood to become a spoon to use in the classroom (have a rotten log nearby for children to carve with blunt old dinner knives).

\*Carve little toys for the class.

\*Carve wooden handles for jump ropes.

Saw a coconut in half to make little drums as a rhythm instrument for use in circle.

Cut bamboo to make little flutes to use in circle.

### Reflective Conclusion

After having spent the past year engaging in purposeful work outside alongside and with the children I am even more convinced of the critical importance of our activities throughout the day. As an experiment, some days toward the end of the year, I brought nothing outside to occupy my time. I stood around watching the children as I had done daily the previous year. I noted that the level of whining increased, as did the requests for me to settle differences among the children. I was used as base in games, whereas when I was working on a project, the children respected the space I needed to accomplish my task.

Next year, I plan to carve another spoon. I had considered working with a machined rectangle of softer butternut wood that I purchased from a woodworker store. However, upon reflection it seemed that the real blessing that I gave to the students was not the end product of the spoon, but rather the notion that a common bark-covered stick with no real purpose could become a useful item. Imagination and the will to act on it and follow through is an invaluable life ability. It enables a person to confront obstacles and propose solutions, however fanciful, that he can then execute. This nurturing of creativity and execution is a central pillar of the Waldorf philosophy. The hardness of the wood was not a hurdle, but instead very advantageous, for it showed that difficult tasks can be overcome by carving away at the problem a little bit every day.

For my future work, I intend to make an outside lesson plan each year that occasionally includes projects from the preceding list that the children can assist me in creating. This list is rich with project ideas which I have not yet explored myself. I intend to work my way through the list in the years to come, choosing projects which will challenge and refine my way of working with and inspiring the children in my care.

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People Resources:

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Karen Smith is a kindergarten teacher at The Waldorf School of Atlanta, located in Decatur, Georgia. She and her husband Kevin have two lovely daughters--Chloe who just finished her first year in college, and Olivia who just finished the second grade at The Waldorf School of Atlanta. Having discovered Waldorf education when her youngest entered kindergarten, Karen quickly knew that her next path in life was to become a kindergarten teacher. She obtained her early childhood teaching certificate from Sunbridge College, and this article was her final paper presented at the completion of her training.

In an effort to provide world-wide collegial support, Karen has created a free online discussion group for Waldorf early childhood teachers where ideas, challenges, circles, stories, project ideas, resources, etc. are shared through e-mail. With a growing membership of over 130 teachers from 10 countries around the world, teachers are able to continue to grow, learn, and find support from the work of others. This closed list is open only to Waldorf teachers, ensuring a high level of trust and confidentiality in their discussions of Waldorf education. If you are interested in joining, please visit <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/waldorfearlychildhoodteachers/> or you can contact Karen directly at [karen@kevinandkaren.com](mailto:karen@kevinandkaren.com) to request an invitation to join the group.