



**Waldorf School
of Princeton**



Early Childhood Program Parent Guidelines

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ASSOCIATION OF WALDORF
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Waldorf EDUCATION



Dear Parents,

We are delighted to offer this guide to you. Please use this as a reference. Your teacher may refer to it at parent meetings or in individual conversations. If it raises questions for you, please do not hesitate to ask your teacher.

Included in this guide is knowledge about child development that informs us in our work with young children. This knowledge is put to use in the classroom, and we want you to understand some of the “whys” of what we do. We have also included some ways you can support your children at home to continue the work that we do in the classroom.

Lastly, we would like to thank you for giving us the most precious gift: bringing your children to our school.

Warmly,

The Early Childhood Teachers at the Waldorf School of Princeton





On the Philosophy, Pedagogy, and Practice

In our fast-paced world, where the full experience of childhood is often compromised, the Waldorf Early Childhood curriculum gives children the time and space to be themselves and grow at their natural pace. We seek to embrace the children's active natures and meet their developmental needs by providing rich multisensory experiences, while recognizing their unique individuality. Through play, the children's physical, emotional, social, and cognitive skills are enhanced. These rich experiences provide a firm foundation upon which to build their future schooling.

The approach used by Waldorf Early Childhood teachers is one of leading by example and being worthy of imitation. Through a daily and weekly rhythm, the children are supported in a way that fosters security and trust.

The Waldorf Early Childhood approach lays the foundation for a healthy unfolding of the different phases of childhood. A balanced, holistic approach to the educational experience sets the stage for children to gain the necessary knowledge and skills to go forth into the world with self-confidence and responsibility for their own destinies.

Our Goals: What We Are Working Toward

We strive to develop in the child a healthy physical body, full sensory integration and a well-established sense of routine, the foundations for future learning.

A Healthy Physical Body

During the first seven years of life, children experience the world kinesthetically, their every motion and exploration providing them a wealth of sensory experience. Young children absorb each impression, without yet having the ability to discern between positive and negative impressions, trusting the world with a great openness. As adults, we have the capacity of higher thinking and the cognitive ability to sift through our impressions and recognize those which cause us harm, creating barriers against them as necessary. It is our responsibility as adults and educators to protect children from these harmful outside influences and impressions, so that their senses are not prematurely blunted or taxed. In this way the children are free to experience the world around them.

Early childhood educators protect the “sense” system by supporting the physical system of the child. Addressing physical comfort and well-being, the teacher ensures the warmth of the children, dressing them in many layers for outdoor adventures and play. Good nutrition is encouraged as the children and teacher prepare balanced meals together. Holding it all together is the daily rhythm, bringing a comforting, reassuring sense of routine to the child's experience of the school

“It is our responsibility as adults and educators to protect children from harmful outside influences and impressions.”

day, all in a natural environment that is stimulating, yet also soothing to the senses.

Sensory Integration

Children learn by experiencing the world through their senses. Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf Education, spoke not only of the traditional senses, but of others as well, among them *touch*, *movement*, *balance*, and *sense of life*.



By touching an object, information (such as temperature, texture, resistance, friction, moisture, dryness) is gained from it. Through touch, children learn about themselves as well as the world: “Whatever I touch also touches me.” This separation and connection with everything surrounding them later translates to relationships with others, and the development of healthy boundaries. Waldorf teachers provide children with a rich array of tactile experiences with which to develop their sense of touch.

sensory integration

Children are naturally quite active, always moving. Their muscles and joints are strengthened as they move and their sense of movement is awakened. This sense gradually develops as children learn to sit up, stand and walk, in the best of circumstances achieving these milestones in their own time, using the forces of their own wills to accomplish them. The daily routine in the kindergarten affords children every opportunity to use their limbs and develop a sense of movement through free and organized play, circle games, and dramatic acting out of stories.

The sense of balance connects us to the three dimensions of space (above/below, left/right, front/back), developing at a natural pace as the child becomes physically ready. The impulse to stand and to walk needs to come from the child's own inner drive, so that balance is learned at the appropriate pace. Prematurely assisting children to stand or walk (before they demonstrate a wish to do so) prevents them from experiencing this step-by-step struggle in development. Allowing them to learn these skills at their own pace leads to a better development of balance. In our Early Childhood classes we walk on the balance beam, hop, skip, jump, swing, run, and twirl to help stimulate and support the sense of balance. Balance enables the children to feel centered in themselves.

The sense of life concerns our wellbeing (whether we feel well or not). This sense helps us notice and monitor what our bodies need and interpret the meanings of our aches and pains. We can

*“Whatever I touch
also touches me.”*

“From one activity to the next, the day flows logically, following daily, weekly and yearly rhythms in order to develop a sense of security, harmony, and expectation.”

support the sense of life by providing children with a safe and stable environment where rhythm and routine prevail along with warmth, nutritious food and adequate sleep.

How We Develop These Goals

Each of these goals is developed through the curriculum of the Early Childhood Program.

Rhythm and Routine

The rhythm and repetition in an Early Childhood class supports learning and healthy development. From one activity to the next, the day flows logically, following daily, weekly and yearly rhythms in order to develop a sense of security, harmony and expectation. Rhythms soon become established habits, minimizing the need for instruction and direction. There is a natural “expansion” and “contraction” inherent in the day's activities. Expansion occurs during times of child-initiated activity, as they explore, play and create imaginary worlds within their surroundings. Contraction occurs during teacher-led time, as the children turn more inward and focus on activities. Expansion and contraction work to foster a healthy balance of activity, creating a natural ebb and flow in the classroom. Established routine also helps to develop a child's memory. To this end, each day of the week has a corresponding activity and snack. Such predictability helps to develop a sense of order, regularity and

security, the seeds of future self-discipline and the development of healthy habits.

Practical and Artistic Activities

Household tasks, such as chopping vegetables, kneading dough, washing and drying dishes, sweeping, cleaning and polishing are integrated into the day. Children learn the simple crafts of sanding, sawing, hammering and wood drilling as well as sewing, finger knitting, wool teasing and carding, silk and wool dyeing. Watercolor painting, crayoning freeform drawings, and modeling with beeswax are part of weekly rhythms, each offering their own tactile experiences. Children sing and dance to seasonal and traditional songs and poems during circle time, and experience a story told by the teacher or presented as a puppet show. Once a week, a trained Eurythmist visits the class and engages the children in Eurythmy, a unique form of movement developed by Rudolf Steiner. Eurythmy helps to lay the foundation for learning to read later on, by correlating motions with sounds in speech. Through all of these practical and artistic activities, the children experience themselves engaged in inherently meaningful and productive ways that bring order, creativity and beauty into the world and fosters in the child a sense of purpose.



chopping

kneading

nutrition

Nutrition

Every day a nutritious, organic snack is served. The menu usually consists of a whole grain item (such as oatmeal or rice), accompanied by a fruit or vegetable and a protein. Children participate in the preparation of the snack (particularly with vegetable preparation on soup day). Bread baking is a weekly activity; the children knead and shape the dough and then later eat the bread for a snack. The preparation and consumption of wholesome and flavorful food is an element central to our program.

Play

Free, imaginative play is one of the most important activities for the young child, both as a means of fostering the capacities ripe for development in the young child and laying the foundation for intellectual skills and emotional wellbeing. The class provides an oasis where the child's creative imagination is protected, nurtured and cultivated through play. Children take up unstructured materials such as cloths, crates, rocking boards, blocks of wood, shells, and pinecones to create imaginary worlds. Free play strengthens the child's imagination, providing a critical foundation for future learning in the grade school.

Play is an important factor in promoting healthy physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. In the physical realm, children are using their limbs (through movement) to respond to their environment. The child's natural inclination to be active is honored and respected. Movement is crucial for the developing brain and is essential for optimal learning. Children learn about relation-

play

“Snow, sleet and ice are good ingredients for outdoor play.”

ships through cooperation and flexibility. Language skills are enhanced when children describe their play to others in order for them to participate. Discipline, concentration, interpretation, and adaptation are skills learned through socio-dramatic play.

Dressing for the Weather

Every day the children spend a great deal of time outside taking walks and playing in the yard. If children are dressed properly they will fully enjoy the elements. Children delight in the changing seasons; rain, with its puddles and mud brings opportunities for special sensory and play experiences. Rain pants, jackets and boots are essential for school. Snow, sleet and ice are also good ingredients for outdoor play. Children need snowsuits, warm mittens, and hats which fit snugly around the ears and neck. Pliable water-

proof gloves keep hands warm and dry and allow for movement and creativity. Wearing the proper clothes suited to the weather enables the child to fully enjoy the outdoors.

Warmth is critical for health and growth. It is our conviction that when a child is kept warm enough, more energy goes toward growing and maintaining good health (as opposed to maintaining warmth). Toddlers and kindergarten-age children need the support of all



"...sleeping is a rhythmic activity akin to breathing..."

caregivers (teachers and parents alike) to dress them warmly, since until the age of nine, children do not usually notice whether they are hot or cold. Layer their clothing to create warmth, using wool or silk or other natural fibers. Hats are a must in chilly weather as so much body heat is lost through the top of the head. Maintaining warmth is a central concern when dressing our children

for outdoor play. On sunny hot days, children are encouraged to put on sun hats and to wear sunscreen.

Sleep

Audrey McAllen, a well-known Waldorf educator, states that the two most important educational factors in the life of a young child are learning how to sleep and to eat. Sleeping is a rhythmic activity akin to breathing. Controlling your child's sleeping and waking, meals, amount of play, and stimulation during the day helps to create a rhythmic life pattern. A special bedtime ritual of perhaps lighting a candle and a simple story or verse is food for sound, deep sleep.



sleep

During the first seven years of life, children are like sponges, absorbing everything in their environment through their senses. Exploring and experimenting within their surroundings, children constantly have new experiences. They take in every word we speak (the sounds of words particularly interest them). These daytime experiences are often processed at night, so consequently a healthy amount of sound sleep is necessary for the full digestion of the day's experiences.

What We Ask of You, the Parents

Our job as educators is greatly facilitated when we are supported by you, the parents. Following are some suggestions for how to work along with the teachers.

Creative Discipline

Communication with children works best when it is clear and uncomplicated. Engaging them with endless decision-making questions about what they want to wear, play with or do overwhelms young children and can make them feel overly conscious, even burdened. They need for us to provide them with the security that can come from our making decisions for them.

Here are some hints based on our accumulated years of experience. *May* is the magic word when working with children, as in, "You may clear your place." It is neither authoritarian nor permissive,

“Communication with children works best when it is clear and uncomplicated.”

but carries a quality of privilege; it invites the child to be the beneficiary of your guidance and loving authority. Sometimes children can be unruly or defiant. Staying calm and centered while addressing them helps children to regain their composure. Explaining and reasoning with them often does no good, because developmentally, they are not yet capable of reason and logic on the same level as an adult. It is our experience that this approach of reasoning a child into compliance prematurely awakens the intellect and pulls them out of the dreamier world of childhood, and is so rarely effective.

Oftentimes a rhythmic lifestyle creates the security and sense of expectation that lessens the need for discipline. The comfort of knowing what is coming eliminates the insecurity that can lead to unruly behavior.

Within the classroom the children learn through imitation and self-discipline. We strive to achieve this by a) providing appropriate play spaces that foster imagination, b) communicating through clear verbal messages with limited choices, c) establishing a rhythmic lifestyle, d) offering real work experiences to develop a sense of purpose, and e) maintaining a positive attitude. Each of these may be incorporated or adapted to the home setting. Each has its own inherent value in the establishment and maintenance of discipline.



“Exposure to media is inherently passive, encouraging neither exercise nor activity.”

Media Recommendations:

Recalling our program's goals, we feel that premature exposure to media can work against the healthy development of our children. Exposure to media inhibits a child's natural ability to create worlds entirely from imagination. In our experience, developing imagination to its fullest extent now will enable them to be more creative problem solvers later. Exposure to media is inherently passive, encouraging neither exercise nor activity.

For these reasons, the Early Childhood Faculty strongly urges parents to limit their children's exposure to electronic media in its various forms. The ideal we and many of our parents strive for is no media exposure in the early childhood ages, as children absorb so many of the images they see in their environment. Often, children may be adversely affected causing disturbances in their behavior, sleep or play activities. Media-influenced behavior may also be a detriment to the atmosphere of a classroom. We have found that a home as free of electronic media as possible contributes to an improved quality of life for the whole family. Media mindfulness is discussed at Parent Evenings, and there are articles and books on this topic that your child's teacher will be able to recommend.

Personal Items Brought to School – Leave Your Treasures at Home

We ask that children not bring personal items such as toys and jewelry to school. They can be lost and are a distraction best left at home. Contributions to our nature table from a walk in the woods or an organic vegetable or fruit to contribute to the snack are always welcome.

media recommendations

“Our distinct cultures and backgrounds are shared...”

Sharing the Social and Cultural Life of the Class

Each Early Childhood class of children, parents, and teachers becomes a little social entity within the school as a whole. Our distinct cultures and backgrounds are shared, and where possible, the teachers try to embrace the seasonal festivals and the cultural life of the families in our class community in addition to those festivals celebrated at our school. This is an enriching and joyful process for all, so please share your background with your child's teacher.

Working Together

Teachers and parents are co-workers with the shared goal of furthering their understanding of each child to guide them rightly in this period of their development. To facilitate this process, the teachers regularly share information with parents about the pedagogy, and discuss the children's development. We welcome your questions and reflections in this challenging but most satisfying process.

What Comes Next and How Do We Get There?

As your child approaches his or her 6th birthday, the Early Childhood faculty will closely observe your child for signs of first-grade readiness. Readiness to continue on to first grade is determined not merely by the child's date of birth (June 1st is the age 6 cutoff date at our school), but by observation of a very broad spectrum of physical, emotional, and intellectual indicators. Early childhood teachers can look at these

indicators, and combined with their own direct knowledge of each child's particular strengths and challenges, gauge readiness. The faculty's goal is not only the immediate success of the child in first grade, but also his/her long term success throughout the grade school years. A child who is ready socially, emotionally and physically will move on to first grade the following year. A child who has not reached particular development milestones may be invited to continue to further his or her development in the early childhood program.



working

sharing

Recommended Reading

The following reading list can help you learn more about Waldorf education and parenting. Some of these titles are available through our Parent Library, and others may be available at the school store. An asterisk indicates excellent starting material.

Aeppli, Willi. *Rudolf Steiner Education and the Developing Child*.

Carey, Diana and Judy Large. *Festivals, Families and Food*.

Cooper, Stephanie, Christine Fynes-Clinton and Mary Rowling. *The Children's Year*.

Coplen, Dotty. *Parenting for a Healthy Future*.

Cusick, Lina. *Waldorf Parenting Handbook*.

* Dancy, Rahima Baldwin. *You Are Your Child's First Teacher*.

* Davy, Gudrun and Bons Voors. *Lifeways: Working with Family Questions*.

Edmunds, Francis. *Rudolf Steiner Education*.

* Fenner, Pamela Johnson and Karen L. Rivers, ed. *Waldorf Education: A Family Guide*.

Goddard, Sally. *The Well Balanced Child*.

Jaffke, Freya. *Work and Play in Early Childhood*.

* Jenkinon, Sally. *Genius of Play*.

Lievegoed, Bernard. *Phases of Childhood*.

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- McAllen, Audrey. *Sleep: An Unobserved Element in Education.*
- * Oldfield, Lynne. *Free to Learn: Introducing Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education.*
- Oppenheimer, Sharifa. *Heaven on Earth: A Handbook for Parents of Young Children.*
- Paterson, Barbara and Pamela Bradley. *Beyond the Rainbow Bridge: Nurturing Our Children from Birth to Seven.*
- * Payne, Kim John. *Simplicity Parenting: Using the Extraordinary Power of Less to Raise. Calmer, Happier, and More Secure Kids.*
- Petrash, Jack. *Understanding Waldorf Education: Teaching from the Inside Out.*
- Poplawski, Thomas. *Completing the Circle.*
- Querido, Rene. *Creativity in Education: The Waldorf Approach.*
- Rawson, Martyn and Michael Rose. *Ready to Learn: From Birth to School Readiness.*
- Ross, Rachel C. *Adventures in Parenting.*
- Rudel, Joan and Siegfried. *Education Towards Freedom.*
- * Schaenen, Inda. *The Seven o'clock Bedtime.*
- Schwartz, Eugene. *Millennial Child: Transforming Education in the Twenty-First Century.*
- Schwartz, Eugene. *Waldorf Education: School for the 21st Century.*
- Solter, Aletha J., PhD. *Helping Young Children Flourish.*
- Steiner, Rudolf. *The Education of the Child.*
- * Thompson, John. *The Natural Childhood.*

