

Waldorf Kindergarten – A Magical Experience for Children

*“Plant a seed of peace
Water it with love
Scare away the birds of prey
And Harvest flowers of joy”*

I would like to share a few ideas about a Waldorf Kindergarten, about a child's journey of life in those first seven years; between birth and change of teeth – both being important developmental milestones. We all know that the organs of a newborn baby are still developing in a fluid and jelly-like state. Then, they slowly begin to form, mature and solidify until the tender milk teeth change to more permanent, solidified teeth at around seven years of age, completing the formation of the physical body, which can then become a useful tool to us. Therefore, during the first seven years, the child learns to be at home in his or her physical body, through the three spiritual milestones – WALKING (uprightness), TALKING (social awareness) and THINKING (self-awareness). Our kindergarten children learn through experience, through creative play and through social interaction in an environment that inspires human will and the faculty of imagination through providing activities which occur in our daily life, in a practical living way. Therefore, the children can find the meaning to life itself.

A kindergarten child mostly learns through IMITATION. Imitation is the key tool for natural learning in these early phases. Adults worthy of imitation imprint their gestures, their accents and even their thinking patterns onto the child's will. Mr. Martyn Rawson in his book, “The educational tasks and contents of the Steiner Waldorf curriculum” says that ‘learning is caught rather than taught.’ Imitation is quite underestimated in conventional schooling, which has mostly replaced it by instruction for children as early as two years. Rote memory, dry learning and the typical ‘by-heart and vomit’ model of assessment has left many a human soul dry and infertile. This manifests in the later years, in the form of the child's lack of motivation and even resistance to study or prepare for an examination; or to even simply read and write.

Imagine a young child lying down, with an adult present in the same environment. A danger lurks – let us say a firecracker comes at both. The adult can ward off or filter out such a sensory impression by closing his ears or moving away, but the infant has no such tools at his disposal because he completely trusts the world and lies there, smiling at the sparks until the cracker bursts and the whole body of the child shudders or freezes in this painful, traumatic experience. Yes! The whole body of the child acts like a sense organ. Therefore, the most important aspect of a child's development lies in its ENVIRONMENT. While a beautiful physical environment may not always be possible in a home or a school, what the child needs most importantly is an environment that is full of rich sensory experiences that are nurturing and healing. This is for the adults in the child's life (teachers, parents, grandparents, uncles/aunts etc.) to create.

Now listen to a song like this and see how step by step, it builds up rhythmical and sequential MEMORY on the one hand, while on the other, brings in good, grammatically beautiful sentence structures and builds good VOCABULARY. Apart from being fun, this activates the human will. Here it goes...

This is the house that Jack built

This is the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the dog that worried the cat that killed the rat that ate the malt that lay in the house that Jack built.

This is the cow with the crumpled horn that tossed the dog that worried the cat.....

This is the maiden all forlorn who milked the cow with the crumpled horn that tossed

This is the man all shaven and shorn who kissed the maiden all forlorn who milked

This is the priest all dressed in a robe who married the man all shaven and shorn, to the maiden all forlorn who.....

This is the cock that crowed all morn that woke up the priest all dressed in a robe who married the

Now, this song forms part of what we describe as a "Morning Circle." Many such songs, be they "calling" songs - "Let's make a circle as round as the sun" or "ending" songs - "The day is over; we all must go home" or the Grace said before fruit or lunch time - "To earth who gives to us this food; Sun who makes it ripe and good"- bring in a mood of reverence and order in our daily rhythm. And all through this, children imitate the adults in a dreamy and unconscious way.

Another important aspect of a child's development is PLAY. In our Waldorf Kindergarten, "Work is Play and Play is Work". There are various kinds of play but chiefly two: Indoor and Outdoor Play. This is interspersed into the daily rhythm like a "breathing out" for the child; amidst all other activities that need focus and attention which is like a "breathing in". Outdoor Play or work includes a nature walk, playing in the sandpit, climbing or hanging from trees or cleverly manipulated equipment with wooden poles and ropes or even a tree house; bringing out the child's inner expression of joy and free will amidst a social setting where there are 25 other children of mixed ages. While the younger ones imitate and follow the older children, simultaneously refining their habits and speech skills, the older ones learn the most important aspects of reverence and leadership by taking the younger ones along or helping them.

Now let us look at Indoor Play. Blessed indeed are those adults who have had an opportunity to sit through a child's FREE PLAY. It is a very healing experience. All the sensory impressions and learning of the previous days, either at school or at home, are almost expressed like a real-life drama, activating the faculty of 'IMAGINATIVE WILL' in these young ones. I have, over the years, experienced family dramas, especially between the father and mother or grandparents, scenes from the market, school, zoo or at the doctor's, at times, even a marriage ceremony or death. I can say very confidently, "An adult who is healthy at 60-70-80 is someone who has played and played as a child"

The adults must provide opportunities for learning through imitation, through sensory impressions that are nurturing and through an environment of order, beauty and worthy of imitation. Such an environment and experience should create a sense of security and loving warmth in children, on the one hand, and on the other, must leave in children, an experience that 'THE WORLD IS GOOD'. A good example of this would be most fairytales, which start with 'Once upon a time' but end with "And then, they lived happily ever after".

The fairytales we tell children through the movement of puppets, the weekly activities of coloring or painting, cooking or cleaning, modeling or knitting with fingers, are a part of the daily or weekly rhythm at our kindergarten. This is combined with a life of preparation and celebration of festivals that belong to the local culture, language, food and rituals in collaboration with parents. All these work on the child's four lower senses in a nurturing way. While it is the social play and the teacher's love that nurtures the child's SENSE OF TOUCH, it is the daily breathing rhythm at home and in our kindergarten that nurtures the SENSE OF LIFE. The indoor and outdoor play also nurtures the SENSE OF MOVEMENT & SENSE OF BALANCE. Working on these four lower senses creates the most precious gifts that we need for further life and further schooling of Imagination & Mental Picturing, of an active will to do and an awareness of the self in relation to the other. But most importantly of HEALTH that manifests in the later part of a Human Biography. No wonder, the term 'SALUTOGENESIS' meaning 'CREATION OF HEALTH' forms the basis of Waldorf schools and kindergartens.

Thank you.

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