



## The Early Years in Steiner Waldorf Education

The phase of early childhood encompasses birth to seven years. There are many Childminders working with Steiner Waldorf Principles, as well as independent Baby and/or Parent and Child groups. Most Steiner Early Childhood (EC) settings also include sessions for parents and very young children. There are a number of Day Care settings, some attached to schools, who care for babies and Children under 3, and some schools also have 'playgroups' or 'nurseries' for 2-4 year olds. In the majority of kindergartens, children are enrolled when they are 3 and over. Each kindergarten group usually has about 18 children of mixed ages from 3 to rising 7 and is led by a specially trained Steiner kindergarten teacher, along with a teaching assistant.

Formal learning of the three R's does not feature in the Steiner EC curriculum in the belief that a child will learn these skills more effectively if he/she has had plenty of time and opportunity to develop socially, emotionally and physically first in a creative, secure, enabling and harmonious environment. The foundation skills in literacy and numeracy are laid through an environment rich in hands on activity and play and where language and communication are enabled through a rich oral tradition.

The kindergarten day follows a predictable pattern, alternating child-led time with a teacher-led activity. The day includes a period of free play which could take place inside or out, and alongside a particular activity such as baking, painting, handicraft. The day flows with regular and repetitive activity, such as Ring-time (or 'circle time') which includes songs and rhythmical verses, music and movement. The snack, prepared by adults and children is shared together around the table, where the mood is relaxed and social. Other activities include drawing, crafts and the domestic arts such as cooking, baking, cleaning and care for self and others. The strong tradition of oral storytelling and puppetry are a part of the morning, and usually end the session.

Many settings offer afternoon care or extended days, which includes lunch, rest time and a longer period of play, generally outside. The morning session which has its own rhythm, is very different from that of the afternoon, and is not repeated once again. The strong sense of routine enables the child knows what to expect and fosters a sense of security.

Very careful consideration is also given to the impact of everything in the kindergarten environment upon all the senses of a young child. There are no 'hard' corners, no strong colours and all the furniture and toys are made of natural materials, as is some of the equipment such as beeswax crayons and sheep's fleece. Every kindergarten has a protected and safe natural outdoor area and where such space is limited, children are taken to a place where they can experience nature. There are many kindergartens that spend all day in the woods or outdoors. The festivals, seasonal and cultural, are celebrated as each unfolds.

Contact with parents is seen as paramount, and parents are valued in the 'community' that is the kindergarten. They are invited to attend events, birthdays, festivals and workshops on different aspects of the educational principles and practice, such as doll making, puppetry, storytelling and crafts. Home visits are arranged, and discussions about the child's development and care take place regularly.

All settings work with the Statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), and have applied for exemptions in areas which conflict with Steiner Waldorf principles and practice.

**Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship**

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