

THE KINDERGARTEN DAY

Children enter the kindergarten between the ages of three and six. Some settings prefer to have separate groups for children up to the age of 4 to enable the youngest children to settle in a smaller group. Each kindergarten group usually has about 16 children although sizes vary. (with a ratio of one adult to 8 children (in line with the statutory welfare requirements)). Each group comprises mixed ages to create a large family structure where older children can become aware of the needs of those younger, and the younger imitate the older child. Older children who are familiar with the rhythm of the kindergarten are encouraged to help the younger children and to ease their integration into the group. The number of sessions a child attends varies according to age. Each session lasts for approximately four+ hours. Where the Kindergarten includes afternoons, lunch (often brought from home) is eaten together around the table, followed by a rest and then further periods of play.

The day is structured so that there is a varied pace, with periods of contraction and expansion to provide a balance between times of activity and times of rest. In practice, this might mean that creative play would be followed by a more concentrated ring-time (music and movement), or energetic outdoor activity by a quiet story, that is, child-initiated activity is alternated with teacher-led activity. The latter is a comparatively short period at this age. The kindergarten day follows a consistent and predictable pattern and the children do the same things at the same times, carried through imitation of others. Within this rhythm the children feel held and safe and rarely express a wish to be excused from an activity or event. The structure of the kindergarten day follows broadly similar pattern in all settings as follows:

Arriving time and play/activity time

As the children begin to arrive, they hang up their coats and change into indoor shoes and say good-bye to the parent/carer before the kindergarten teacher welcomes each child. The day begins with a period of free play (see below), perhaps getting the dolls up and dressed, building with small logs or driving a bus made from upturned chairs. During this free-play time, the teacher and assistants are usually engaged in some task, such as preparing the dough if it is baking day. Each day of the week is identified by a particular 'doing' activity such as baking, gardening, painting, a seasonal handicraft, modeling, cleaning or woodwork. They might make things for particular festivals, such as window decorations, lanterns and mobiles, sew or braid, either for the kindergarten room or to take home. The children are welcome, but not required to 'help' with the activity and they are expected to engage in the activity only for as long as their interest lasts. In all these activities the children learn by example, finding their way in to the experiences at their own pace. Some of the children may prefer to be around the adults, as children traditionally have been, watching or helping, while adults work. These informal moments are vital, not least in a world in which parents are often so busy. In this way the children learn to explore and be creative whilst acquiring a love of work. This manifests itself in an increasing mood of self-reliance and calm industriousness when the children are engaged.

The teacher and assistants initiate the next phase by beginning to clear the things away and the children join in helping each tool or object to find its place on shelf or in basket – sorting, matching, folding and stacking. Tidying up is an important task and it is done in such a way that it does not occur to the children that this is something that spoils their fun or is a tedious chore. It is done out of imitation of the adults and more experienced children, and soon becomes part of the rhythm of the kindergarten day.

Ring time

Once things have been put back in their places after the 'doing' activity and play, the children gather for ring-time. The activities in ring time help focus the children's attention, develop their linguistic skills and help strengthen their motor skills. Ring-time is when the children come together in a circle and sing traditional songs, play games and rhythmical verses are spoken and acted out. Listening and clear articulation is practiced through this kind of rhythmical recitation which is repeated for a week or more. Children leave kindergarten with a rich and varied repertoire of songs, stories and poems, including verses in French, German or other languages, which they have learned during ring time. Sometimes the eurythmist (movement teacher) or foreign language teacher may visit and contribute to the ring-time activities. Ring time is sometimes referred to as 'circle time'.

Snack time

Next, the children go to the toilet and wash their hands in preparation for snack time. Some of the older ones help lay and set the table with mats, cutlery and a vase of flowers. Bread and fruit, or a variety of healthy organic snacks such as muesli, fruit salad, rice pudding or soup are placed on the table and everyone gathers to say a blessing on the meal and they may also sing some seasonal songs before eating. Meal times offer an opportunity for moral, social and mathematical development to work together as children engage in sharing out of food, partaking in conversation and listening to the comments of others about various bits of 'news'. Some of the children help clear up while others get ready to go outside.

Outdoor time

Every kindergarten has a safe outdoor play space usually with sandpits, trees, bushes for dens/hiding areas and small-scale paths. The outdoor space often also includes an organic vegetable garden where the children can work alongside the adults in caring for the garden or vegetables or playing together. The produce is used for the snack. Recycling and composting is part of the ethos. All children help to tidy the garden before coming in to hang up coats and scarves and put on indoor shoes. The development of the physical co-ordination through movement, balance etc is fundamental at this age. Climbing trees, balancing on poles, skipping with large and small ropes, or doing hard physical digging all provide an excellent opportunity for children to develop these capacities and to find their own boundaries. Further, play out of doors has a different quality/mood from the indoor play and allows for a different social dynamic to emerge. It also provides an opportunity for children to begin to appreciate their environment.

Some kindergartens are particularly committed to the importance of the outdoors and so have prioritised the establishment of extensive rhythm of activities. Sometimes the whole morning is spent outside.

Story time

The morning concludes with story time. Story time is always a very special event. The mood is hushed and the expectation is that children will listen and respect that this is a quiet time. The children are told (never read) many wonderful stories that belong to the literary heritage of the culture of childhood, sometimes supported by a puppet show by the teacher. Fairy tales and nature stories address the feeling realm and awaken a moral sense. A well-told story creates an appreciation for the human voice and the beauty and rhythms of language. It also helps to extend vocabulary and to aid the development of a good memory. Children love to hear the same story many times and delight in the repetition which brings the opportunity for children to familiarise themselves with the material and to deepen their relationship to it. By the time the story ends, parents/carers are waiting outside to collect the children.

THE KINDERGARTEN ENVIRONMENT

The indoor space

The Steiner early childhood curriculum is based on an understanding that all the senses of the young child are very impressionable and that *everything* that surrounds a child has a direct although sometimes extremely subtle impact on the child. Very careful consideration is therefore given to the detail of the quality of all aspects of the kindergarten environment to ensure that it is gentle to the eye, ear and all the senses. The physical space is designed to be home-like and as free from exterior distraction as possible. The scale of the space should not overwhelm a small child and so where possible the ceiling is low, there are no 'hard' corners and it is decorated in soft tones of pink to create a gentle, secure feeling. Each child has his/her own coat peg with their name above it and somewhere to leave a change of shoes. There is a nature table, which follows a seasonal theme, and the decorations are also seasonal and are always displayed with moderation, using soft material and pastel colours. There is a quiet corner, a home corner, an area for floor play and building large constructions, an area for the activity or snack tables and chairs. The kitchen area is partitioned but usually within the room.

Materials and toys

The furniture is made of wood and is intended for multi use by the children. Toys are made of natural materials and are deliberately crafted to be relatively undefined to allow maximum scope for imaginative use as props in children's play. They include wooden blocks and logs, natural plain cloth, shells, and hand-made dolls. Equipment includes grain mills, juice presses, woodwork tools, spinning wheels and other simple manual tools, watercolours, broad brushes, beeswax crayons, sheep's fleece, sewing materials and specially designed picture books. There are also a variety of materials in soft colours for dressing up or using to cover the wooden screens, which can make houses, boats or castles. In the home corner there are small cradles, prams, table and chairs, kitchen equipment and more. There are often instruments for musical activities, and sometimes a quiet/book corner with a few carefully chosen picture books, which are changed regularly.

The outdoor space

Every kindergarten will have a protected and safe outdoor area for play and work where the children are allowed to climb trees, hide in bushes or play in the sand or mud pit. The outdoor equipment is simple, with a choice of skipping ropes, digging or raking equipment, and logs and branches for building dens. Where outdoor space is limited, children are taken to the local park, playground or wherever they can experience nature. Where possible, children are introduced to gardening/composting in the kindergarten garden where there is an opportunity to become familiar with the process of growing from planting to harvesting.

KEY PEDAGOGICAL PRIORITIES

The Steiner early childhood approach recognises that experimentation with 'writing' and numbers is part of a young child's normal development. For example, a child will naturally 'write' signs for their games or use conkers and shells as 'money'. However, formal learning is not introduced until the child starts school at rising 7. We firmly believe that young children are not physically, emotionally and intellectually ready for formal learning at the kindergarten stage and that young children benefit from an unhurried and stress free environment where there is time to discover the world around him/her and to master physical co-ordination, speech and other life skills before abstract learning is introduced. The focus in a Steiner kindergarten therefore is on developing these skills in preparation for formal schooling when the pupils is rising 7, especially the following skills:

Speech

The evidence of the importance that Steiner EY curriculum attaches to the spoken word is in the way the day is structured. Good communication and oral numeric skills develop out of playing and working together in an informal and practical atmosphere. Every day the children take part in activities such as counting games, rhythmic activities, poetry, rhymes and singing, including material in foreign languages. The oral tradition is integrated into most parts of the kindergarten day to encourage listening and speech development. They listen to stories told by the teacher, which include a rich vocabulary. Children experience the musicality of language and its social aspects through playing ring games and eurythmy, a form of movement, which works with language and music. Children are encouraged to speak freely and learn to listen to others. Use of language enables cognitive development and well-chosen words and good syntax support clear thinking. The development of a good memory and recall are reliant on the spoken word, rather than the printed word or computers, and speech develops concentration and empathy, which are essential for formal learning.

Mathematical concepts

The kindergarten experience integrates mathematical concepts and the use mathematical language on the grounds that grasping mathematical concepts such as weight, measure and shape is most meaningful when it relates to everyday activities and routines. For example, the preparation of food provides an opportunity to weigh, measure, count and recognise numbers on scales, and setting the table is another area where maths is used in a practical way. Through movement games, children recognise and recreate patterns - in, out, alternate, in front of, behind. Natural objects such as acorns, pinecones, conkers and shells are sorted, ordered and counted, as part of spontaneous play or tidy. This approach to the introduction of mathematics embeds the concepts in a social and moral context.

Dexterity and physical co-ordination

Formal learning relies on dexterity and physical co-ordination. In Steiner kindergartens children have the opportunity to develop both large and small motor skills throughout the range of directed and child-initiated activities, such as laying the table, finger games and eurythmy. These activities develop hand to eye co-ordination, manual dexterity and orientation. For example, doing some simple sewing or weaving is a useful preparation for reading print from left to right, and a lot of skill is needed in woodwork.

Social skills

The development of social skills and awareness of others are also precursors to formal learning and prepares children for the level of behaviour that is required once children in the classroom situation. In a Steiner kindergarten children are encouraged to share, to work together, to care for each other and to respect the needs of others. The behaviour of children is molded by what surrounds them. Kindness is practised by teachers and encouraged in the children and they learn to trust the adults around them. Many items are made as gifts for family members. Traditional fairy tales and nature stories address the feeling realm and gradually awaken a fine moral sense for knowing right from wrong.

Respect for the natural environment

In a Steiner kindergarten, children are encouraged to appreciate the natural world in order to help them to value its gifts and to understand its processes and the patterns of the seasons. The beauty of nature, plants, insects and animals is brought to the children with awe and wonder. Domestic tasks provide opportunities for elementary experiences of science and the four elements. When children make toys from sheep's wool, wood, felt, cotton and other natural materials they learn about its origin. Local crafts people are often invited to visit kindergarten; short local walks provide an opportunity for the children to appreciate some of nature's wonders. Children are encouraged to look after the kindergarten equipment, sanding

and oiling wooden furniture and toys, mending things that break, washing cloths and other simple tasks which children and adults can do together.

KEY PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

The education is based on the notion that everything which surrounds the child, both visible and invisible, has an impact on the child. The education takes account of the whole child, including his/her the soul qualities and believes that children's learning flourishes in a calm, peaceful, predictable, familiar and unhurried environment which recognises the child's sensory sensitivities.

The whole child

The Steiner curriculum takes as given the interconnectedness of physical, emotional, social, spiritual and cognitive development. Young children need to experience the relevance of their world before they separate themselves from it and begin to analyse it in a detached way. Learning gains meaning by its relevance to life and should not be separated from the business of daily living. The learning experience of children under seven therefore is integrated and not subject based. Mathematics and use of mathematical language, for example, might take place at the cooking table, where food is prepared (thinly sliced carrots make wonderful natural circles and have the added virtue of being able to be eaten later in soup!) and concepts such as addition and subtraction (or more or less), weight, measure, quantity and shape are grasped in a practical manner as part of daily life. Children are able to tell story by 'reading' the pictures in a book, which develops verbal skills and frees the narrative from the printed text and encourages children to use their own words. Many children also act out or perform puppet shows and develop dramatic skills through working with narrative and dialogue. The conversations around the meal table, give the children the opportunity to become familiar with listening and speaking, rhyming and riddles. Painting and drawing help with balance and symmetry. The integration of these activities cultivates a love of language, develops speech and allows children time to become really familiar with the spoken word - the best preparation and foundation for the subsequent development of literacy.

Play is a young child's work

Young children find their own learning situations in play. Studies demonstrate that good players show more empathy towards others and good social skills and are less aggressive; are able to see things from the perspective of the other and show less signs of fear, sadness and fatigue. Play also strengthens the imagination -- an essential aspect of cognitive development. Through play children are able to exercise and consolidate their ability to understand and think and to develop and strengthen their concentration. Creative play supports physical, emotional and social development and allows children to learn through investigation, exploration and discovery. It encourages children to become inventive and adaptable. Children are able to exercise and consolidate their ability to understand and to think through their play and take initiative. In addition it develops and strengthens concentration. Studies show that children who score highest in socio-dramatic play also demonstrate the greatest gains in a number of cognitive areas such as higher intellectual competence, longer attention span, and more innovative and creative thinking. In the kindergarten the children are given opportunity for child led free play (both inside and outside), play arising out of the child's own observation of life, where they have the opportunity to integrate socially and to use their imaginations and fantasy to recreate and work out situations which they have seen or experienced. There is no adult interference in the play, as the adult is involved in their 'work' and able to observe and help where necessary.

'Doing' is learning

A kindergarten is a community of "doers" and through 'work' the young child learns not only social and domestic skills, but are able to develop good motor and practical skills. They 'think' with their entire physical being, learn through doing and experiencing and 'grasp' the world through experiential and self-motivated physical activity. Also, the will is developed through doing activities when children are young and 'doing' activity brings long-term benefits to learning later on. Young children learn for life from life.

Rhythm and repetition are crucial

Regular patterns of activities create routine and foster a sense of security and self-confidence and help the child to know what to expect. Working with rhythm helps children to live with change, to find their place in the world, and to begin to understand the past, present and future. It provides a very real foundation for the understanding of time - what has gone before and what will follow - and helps children to relate to the natural and the human world. Children's memories are strengthened by recurring experiences and daily, weekly and yearly events in kindergarten (such as festivals and celebrations) are remembered and often eagerly anticipated a second time around.

Repetition helps to support good habits. So in a Steiner kindergarten emphasis is given to regular patterns of activities repeated within the day, week and year to provide rhythm and routine. Every day has its own rhythms, which support the day's activities - a 'tidy up' song, for example, might signal the end of one activity and the beginning of another. Seasonal activities celebrate the cycles of the year - autumn might be a time for threshing and grinding corn and spring a time for planting. Stories, songs, verses and craft activities relate to the season and a 'seasonal area' in the room reflects the changing natural world throughout the year, as do the themes of the songs, stories and poems.

The role of 'mood'

The kindergarten day has different 'moods' within it, which provide an opportunity for children to learn that there is an expectation to adjust behaviour in different situations. The creating of different moods to accompany different kinds of activities is done very deliberately as a way of allowing children to become aware of the invisible boundaries that determine what kind of behaviour is appropriate for the situation. For example, there are moments of reverence each day when the children associate the mood with stillness, awe and wonder. The mood mealtime, on the other hand, is more sociable and is associated with being aware of others - ensuring that everyone has a share of the food, listening to another child's 'news'. Seasonal or culturally relevant festivals provide the opportunity to create a special joyful and celebratory mood. They usually involve other members of the families. Birthdays are important events, where the parents provide the 'birthday story' based on the child's own life, which is told at a special birthday ceremony to which families are invited. At all times the teacher will aim to integrate other assistants, parents and visitors into the rhythm of the morning without disrupting the carefully prepared 'mood' of the kindergarten.

THE TEACHER

Steiner kindergarten teachers (or early childhood leaders) undertake a rigorous formal training in Steiner Early childhood pedagogy. The qualifications are accepted on the national qualification framework (CWDC) and by OfSTED. The training includes the pedagogical philosophy, its approach to child development that underpins Steiner Early childhood education and the pivotal role of child observation for assessing and monitoring each child's development. Teachers are trained to be conscious of their own moral influence upon the child and that young children perceive and imitate everything the adults do - it is not only what one does before the young child but also *how* one does it. How we handle our tools and

materials, our relationships with colleagues and parents, and even our thoughts, feelings, gestures and body language, are all registered and internalised by the child. The teachers are also trained to encourage independent activity and development through the child's self-initiated action/play and to hold the group together through a quiet, calm presence.

The teaching method

Steiner Early childhood teachers work with their image of the child as a spiritual being bearing gifts, and it is the task of the teacher to help the child to unwrap these gifts as the child develops. The teachers' role is to be conscious of their responsibility to provide a nurturing, warm and secure environment and to respect the wisdom of childhood and the child's unique mode of experiencing and learning as the first step towards affirming the sense of self. There is no deliberate effort to 'teach' the children in any formal sense. Imitation is one the most effective and natural means of learning at this age and can be most easily directed when the adults perform their tasks consciously and carefully, repeating the gestures of each action in a rhythmical and natural way. The children imitate the conscious activity of the teacher. To see an adult at work, perhaps in the activity of carving a spoon, in which care, skill, concentration and perseverance are all demanded, is a wonderful example to the ever-watchful child – a lesson in the sustained application of will-power. Children can learn to do quite complex practical tasks, even involving sharp or awkward tools or equipment, if they see them regularly performed with love and care. Teachers therefore carry out their daily tasks in such a way as to be worthy of imitation and remain vigilant that they are providing a role model and example at all times. The teacher who sets the example may then have certain expectations of the children.

A happy, smooth transition from home to school relies on the teacher's good relationship with parents/carers. The kindergarten teacher's role includes home visits and parent evenings. Lectures, study groups, workshops and informal parent led sessions also provide a forum for understanding more about the Steiner approach to young children and what can be done at home to support the work in the kindergartens. Links are made through festivals and a range of social and school-based events and activities.

Lesson planning, monitoring and assessment

The teacher works together with colleagues to plan and record the lessons and prepare appropriate stories, songs, verses and activities for the age, season or situation. They review their planning, the children's development or the kindergarten situation frequently. The kindergarten staff take care of the administrative duties that are necessary for the smooth running of the group. There are weekly kindergarten meetings where the teachers, assistants and other colleagues work together to review their work, the children's development, and also to plan and keep abreast of the requirements for further training in areas such as child protection, the EYFS, SEN, new legislation, equal opportunities, first aid, health and safety, food hygiene, keeping children safe. They attend occasional short training courses provided by the local authority and the Steiner Schools Fellowship.

Observation of the whole child and child study are regarded as an integral part of understanding the development of each child. The teacher and assistant observes each child carefully as a matter of course. Formal, written observations and child study is undertaken with parental consultation at times and the observations are often recorded in a 'child profile' which is developed to work with the Steiner curriculum and developmental stages of the child. The EYFS Profile for 5 year olds is generally completed for the 5 year olds by settings who receive the grant.

Appendix 1 Why children's work is not displayed in the kindergarten

We regard each piece of work that our children produce as important expressions of their developing skills/capacities. Their drawings are particularly significant as indicators of developmental progress. For these reasons we take careful note of everything that the children produce and to what a child may want to tell us about their work. We also consider that it is important to show respect and appreciation of their efforts and to take good care of whatever has been created by way of setting a good example for the children. But we do not display the work of young children. Young children are primarily doers. They love activity and for them the process is much more important than the result and viewing the display is less satisfactory than the producing of it. When the painting is finished and the child has shown it to the teacher and the teacher has shown appreciation, children usually ignore the product of their efforts after that and moves on to something new.

The teacher, however, takes careful note of both of the child at work and of the finished product. She will either be careful to put it ready for the child to take home (pictures may be rolled and tied with wool, other projects wrapped), or the teacher may keep the piece of work to give to the family at the end of term/end of the school year or at the next festival, if the project is directly related to the festival. For example, the felted chicks may be gathered in a nest of straw as they are completed, ready to give out at the spring festival, or the whole spread of paintings (one from each week) will be collected in a folder that the child has made, and given to the parents at the end of the term or school year. In this way children are shown that their work is valuable and to be taken care of, and that the work of producing it is worthwhile and noted, but they are not encouraged to dwell upon it after it is complete.

In situations where the child takes their drawings home more frequently, the teacher will keep a few as part of the child's portfolio, because studying the drawings and painting produced over several months contributes to the teacher overview of the child's progress.

APPENDIX 2 Why you won't find computers or other electronic equipment in a Steiner kindergarten

Normally computers are introduced to five year olds in mainstream schools. In Steiner schools an ICT programme of learning/computers is introduced when pupils reach early adolescence. The use of computers/watching television for young children is incompatible with the Steiner approach. We remain convinced of the benefits of introducing computers later and encouraging parents to do away with television at home. Later introduction avoids the problems associated with young children dwelling in virtual reality that can lead to confusion/distortion of values and perception and the undervaluing of one's own judgment and capacities. It also avoids premature reliance on the computer as a teaching/learning tool, e.g. spell-checking

Young children need learning opportunities that can help them make sense of where our 'power' really comes from through involving the children in practical tasks such as making tea on a fire in the garden. Machines that reveal their actual workings and that allow the children to participate fascinate children. Steiner pedagogy recognises that the young child builds up her/his picture of the world from real tangible experiences in her/his everyday life. So, for example, she helps to shake the jar of cream until it becomes butter and then spreads this on the bread that she has helped to bake. In this experiential way, she learns how things happen, that real human physical effort is required, and that she is able to participate. It is therefore no coincidence that you will find children in a Steiner kindergarten busy with 'work' – sweeping with dustpan and brush, duster and polish, washing dolls' clothes, grinding wheat

in a hand mill before making bread, chopping vegetables for the soup cooked on a hob, and tending the garden with real tools. In our experience, children who are given the opportunity to experience the practicalities of the real world in this way in their early years, develop capacities that enable them to use very complex technology creatively and competently when they are older. The five year old who is happy to build his own 'computer' out of shells carefully arranged on a plank in his game has no problem in using ICT as a teenager.

We believe that using computers/watching television causes chronic disorganising of the child's vulnerable growing senses and is detrimental to whole child development.

Re: physical and neurological development - sitting still for extended periods is not natural for young children. It takes away time from play and contributes to child obesity; the flicker of screen affects long-term brain patterning; rapidly changing images reduces concentration and attention span.

Re: psychological and emotional development - watching the screen is a poor substitute for human contact. The development of emotional literacy depends on warm relationships with real people who care for them; secondary experience blurs the distinction between what is/is not real; fixed images reduce the possibilities of developing mental pictures and the development of imagination;

Re: social development - it diminishes the opportunity for social interaction with others; stunts speech development; provides stylised models of behaviour and inhibits social development that is dependent on the example of others.

Additional reasons:

- Learning of specific skills, such as those require to understand and use computers, relies on a certain level of maturity and conceptual thinking and on developing other competences in pupils first, such as sense of judgment, emotional literacy, knowledge management, social skills and physical dexterity.
- Developing the child's imagination and the human relationship in teaching are key to successful learning and the learning experience benefits from human relationships involved in story telling, making and doing. Fixed images and static concepts as implied by computers/television limit capacity for picture-building
- Computers/television can disrupt a young child's receptiveness to the essence of the Steiner approach by undervaluing the human quality and detaching the child from detaches from the real life experiences in the kindergarten
- Watching the screen requires no activity, which runs counter to the natural activeness of young children. Sitting still for prolonged periods creates obesity
- we share the concern about the damaging effect of electro-magnetic fields

Further, there is no evidence that early introduction to computers benefits learning in the long term and there is a growing body of research and thinking that is critical of television and computers for young children, including:

'*Mind-altering media*' by Helen Phillips - New Scientist 19 April 2007; '*Toxic Childhood*' by Sue Palmer - Orion Books, London, 2006

'*Remotely Controlled*' by Dr Aric Sigman - Vermillion, London, 2005;

'*Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds* by Jane M. Healy - Simon & Schuster, New York, 1998;

'*The Human Brain: A Guided Tour*' by Professor Susan Greenfield - Science Masters, 1998