

Waldorf Education is “Developmentally Appropriate” – What exactly does this mean?

When Waldorf teachers say their curriculum is developmentally appropriate they mean it! But Waldorf educators understand child development in a unique way. Child development in the Waldorf plan is very specific. The decisions about the curriculum are based on exactly what is happening in the child's physical, and emotional development and also in the development of the child's consciousness.

The interest in the specific developmental steps a child takes during the unfolding of a fully developed human being is linked to a wish to avoid skipping any “building blocks” in the child's wholesome development. These might not be visible at the moment they are missed, but they could become stumbling blocks at a later phase of development. Likewise, to push a child's development, to “hurry it up,” might look successful in the moment, but can cause trouble later on. Seemingly capable of wondrous things in a moment, the child might experience anxieties, or physical ailments, or even heart problems or nervous disorders in middle age!

In the first instance of “stumbling blocks,” a good example is offered in watching an infant who, at birth, has many reflexes as it opens up from a contracted fetal position or a little bud, into an opened flower-like little person capable of moving limbs freely and holding uprightness. As an unencumbered child accomplishes one miraculous step toward independent carriage after another, the reflexes, no longer useful, recede and disappear. Once the reflex is gone, true physical freedom arrives in that part of the body. If the reflex is retained, the child is less free, and often develops compensating movements to handle the cumbersome remaining reflex.

The tonic reflex is one example. The infant when turning its head automatically curls the arm toward the back of the head, and the leg into the body. Then the child extends the arm in front of the face and also extends the leg on that side. If the baby turns its head the other way the straightened arm and leg curl and the curled arm and leg straighten. If the baby has very little time of its own to practice on its back freely (held strapped in a car seat or a baby chair, for example) this reflex remains. It's harmless enough but causes a child by first grade to have trouble holding his or her head up without propping it up, chin in hand, elbow on the desk. In other words, the child isn't free but must compensate. Waldorf educators would wish to free this up and invent games to play with the children to help the child exercise toward being able to do it and to stand freely with arms and hands (and tongues and feet and legs) freed from the head's motions.

In the second instance, more common in our culture, of hurrying a child, the Waldorf approach would watch carefully for symptoms of the child's consciousness. In early childhood happiness is an important component for complete development. A little child is happiest in play. In fact we are all at our best, happiest and most human when we are playful. Play comes when we are relaxed, unafraid, unencumbered by problems, comfortable in our physical bodies and, well, free. Waldorf teachers understand this well. Now scientific studies are proving that this kind of playful happiness we classically associate with childhood stimulates the strong development of healthy organs in the body and actually stimulates healthy brain development.

Oddly enough, the idea that having little children work on reading and arithmetic, based on an assumption that the earlier one starts the more practice the child will get, works against healthful brain development. Movements like jumping, running, skipping riding a bike, swinging on a swing, stimulates the vestibular system, promotes large motor skill and coordination, enhances sensory integration and, most importantly supports the brain in its unfolding and myelination. This last is the process of fatty substances coating the neurons that develop in the brain with every new experience. This fatty substance creates maturity in the brain so that the substance of the brain communicates and integrates to make it maximally useful and

flexible. Skipping past the playful movement part of childhood to get at academics earlier can, therefore, curtail proper brain growth.

Recent fMRI equipment has illuminated the fact that in young children, artistic work, full body playing, and sensory stimulation all light up the whole brain. Focused academic work, on the other hand, only lights up small parts of the brain. That “lighting” up points to the development of neurons, making the child’s brain replete with neurons which end up looking, at their best, like a gorgeous, mature tree crown. Once myelinated, these neurons communicate for clear thinking, flexible problem solving, executive function, and creativity.

Until very recently, we all thought that once a child could answer back, her judgment was valid, to be considered along with other opinions, worthy of a “vote” in decision making strategies. Now we know that the human brain is not mature until the age of 25 or so. In the words of Dr. Christopher Giedd, the child psychiatrist whose research revealed this fact, “Who would have thought that car insurance companies have been right all along.”

In Waldorf schools, these facts are understood and teachers wait for a ripeness, a readiness in a child, before burdening the budding consciousness with academic facts and skills. When the child is “ready,” a subject can be introduced and be to the child a support, a rewarding challenge, a real joy to tackle, instead of a burden, a pressure, a taxing task difficult to struggle to achieve.

At all phases of child development Waldorf teachers know that to push a child past ordinary limits is expensive in the child’s self-confidence, sense of enthusiasm, and physical strength. Pushing steals away important life forces of the child that might show as deficit or illness later on in the life of the young human being. When met with the right things to do or to develop at the right time, a child learns to love learning, to develop habits of inner enthusiasm for life.

So “age appropriate curriculum” is a serious matter in Waldorf schools. In Waldorf teacher preparation, the focus is on understanding the different life forces that are released at specific times: when the child’s milk teeth fall out; when a child can throw a ball translaterally with ease; when a child can add, subtract, multiply and divide unaided by counters, when puberty arrives.

During early childhood, before the change of teeth, Waldorf teachers protect the child from academic learning, knowing that then the child is free to use her body in ways that release all infantile reflexes. Counting things playfully or to set the table or to play rhyming games are all helpful if done in a spirit of playfulness or practical need. Symbol recognition can develop through many means, not simply through letter recognition.

When a child arrives at the age of nine, she can think practically about the cycle of the year, of growth, of water, of building. And when puberty arrives, a sense of independent abstract thinking, of judgment can be exercised without demanding more than the child has inner capacity to exercise.

When taught this way, children have a chance to consolidate learning before leaping forward to “the next thing” and to yearn for what comes next. Anticipation leads a young soul to feel that life is full of wonders that are yet to be discovered, instead of feeling build in a mountain of things difficult to apprehend. Anticipation makes a child enthusiastic and strong. Delivering everything early on can make a child feel overwhelmed, like all learning is “more of the same,” beyond reach and voluminous.

In Waldorf teaching, the deep artistry comes in identifying the readiness in a child and in a whole class for a new capacity to be engaged toward practice, toward strength. Joy in learning, trust in the world as graspable and solvable, an inner habit of happiness and engagement, are byproducts of this approach.

“Age appropriate” is a term used frequently in our culture to describe behavior, curriculum, and

educational approaches. Never is it more specific and exacting than in the view of human development with a curriculum to match it Waldorf Education. In that approach it is exacting for the teachers so that it need not be exacting or unfairly burdensome to the children!