

Kindergarten Program and Curriculum

(The text that follows is adapted from the websites of member schools of the Alliance for Public Waldorf Education and the San Francisco Waldorf School.)

The Waldorf-Inspired Public School Kindergarten offers a joyful, nurturing setting that inspires the imagination through creative play, storytelling, puppetry, music, movement, and art. Emphasis is placed on the healthy development of the physical body through practical activities that include handwork, crafts, baking, cooking, gardening, sweeping, digging, nature walks, and plenty of time outdoors. Responsibility for self and others is encouraged through attention to sharing, caring, and taking care of our Kindergarten classroom and play yard. The rich foundations of written language and literacy are established with an emphasis on the oral traditions of storytelling, puppetry, and song. The foundations of mathematics are nurtured through rhythmic movement, music and the practical activities of cooking, sewing, gardening, and carpentry. Attention to, and care of, the natural world and its beauty lay a healthy foundation for more precise scientific explorations in the later years.

Waldorf-inspired schools recognize that the young child learns primarily through imitation and example. Great care is taken to provide an environment that brings nurturing guidance and cooperation into the child's world of imagination and fantasy. The week is rhythmically structured to include storytelling and puppetry, creative work and play, singing and creative movement, games and finger plays, crafts, art activities, and fairy tales.

Since the young child's response to the environment is imitation with openness and trust, the teacher's goal is to become a worthy role model in gesture, mood and speech. The teacher strives to create an environment, both inside and out, that is beautiful, orderly and calm, yet also stimulating. Natural materials and open-ended toys are selected to nourish the senses and support the children in developing their imagination, creativity, focus, flexibility, and their motivation to engage with the world and others.

The curriculum is play-based and nature-oriented in keeping with the awakening capacities of the young child below the age of seven. The curriculum includes indoor and outdoor free-play periods in which the children imaginatively and creatively self-direct their play. The play times are interspersed with circle time (language arts, movement, and music), artistic activities (which vary daily and include painting, drawing, and beeswax modeling), snack time and story time.

The Blessing of Time in the Waldorf-Inspired Kindergarten

In the initial Kindergarten year, if a two-year program is available, children are introduced to the rhythms and routines of the Waldorf-Inspired Kindergarten. With time, they learn to move through the transitions of the day with ease. They are introduced to a thoughtfully planned, rich array of activities. These, along with ample time for play, facilitate the development of age-appropriate physical, cognitive, emotional and social skills. During the second year, if available, the rhythms of Kindergarten already live deeply in the children. They are free to refine the qualities they began to develop in the first year. They are inspired by their new role as Kindergarten "veterans" to reach a higher level of mastery in all they do, demonstrate a greater

degree of self-control, and provide assistance to others. By the end of this year, the children are well prepared to make the transition to first grade.

An Overview of the Waldorf Kindergarten

The Waldorf Kindergarten is typically a play-based, half day, one or two-year program. In the Kindergarten, the teachers gently lead the child across the bridge from home to school, laying a strong, healthy foundation for the academic program that begins in First Grade.

In a homelike environment, the Kindergarten program is rich in singing, seasonal activities, painting, puppetry and storytelling. Waldorf teachers believe it is profoundly important that the child have time to develop body, imagination and will in a secure setting. Free play with simple natural toys draws out the imagination.

Because the Kindergarten child lives so deeply in the environment around him and imitates all he sees, the teacher strives to create an environment that mirrors back to the child the Good and the Beautiful. The teacher cultivates a reverence for nature and for caring relationships and good habits, laying a solid foundation for lifelong learning, personal development, fruitful relationships with others and engagement with the world.

The Kindergarten program is based upon the simple, yet profound concepts of imitation, repetition, and creative play. Due to its unique two-year format, if available, the Waldorf-methods Kindergarten is appropriate for a mixed age group of children from early five year olds to the pre-First Grade six year olds. The Kindergarten child will gradually become accustomed to working within a group, listening to stories, interacting with the teacher, and following a daily routine, while at the same time being aided in his or her development as an individual through the encouragement of creative play, healthy movement indoors and out, practical life skills, and many artistic opportunities.

Here are some of the core activities of the Waldorf-methods Kindergarten and the significance of each in relations to the student's ongoing development:

Circle Time

Early in the Kindergarten day, the class is brought together to recite verses, sing songs, and play developmental games with the teacher. These are often connected with the season, a particular fairy tale, or are just part of the general lore of childhood. The children develop gross and fine motor skills during circle time where the story, or seasonal theme, will be worked into an imaginative, movement-based story, poem or song. Here the children move together, listening, reciting, keeping sequences, learning body geography, integrating reflexes and developing spatial awareness.

Repeating and remembering verses and songs with movement establishes a strong multi-sensory foundation for the more intense memory work to come in the grades. In circle, teachers establish the foundations of an oral approach to teaching reading and literacy, and integrate those language-based activities with coordinated opportunities for healthy movement, spatial and body awareness, and social interaction.

Artistic Activities, Handwork, and Crafts

Wet-on-wet watercolor painting, beeswax modeling, crayon drawing, as well as forms of handwork such as finger knitting, braiding, sewing, and wood working, are done as a group activity, although each child is absorbed in his or her own work. *These activities encourage the child's natural sense of beauty, color, and form, as well as laying the groundwork for the artistic techniques that will be required for all the subjects to come in the Waldorf grades curriculum. They also aid significantly in the development of fine motor skills, sequencing, and spatial awareness.* Confidence is increased as they master these skills. As their confidence and self-control develop, the children also participate in simple woodworking, beading, candle dipping, weaving and other crafts.

Free Play

Free play is a self-directed activity. A child's self-directed play develops imagination, creativity, large and fine motor development, problem solving, social skills and verbal skills. Younger children participate in all of these activities as their stage of maturity allows. Some teacher guidance may be necessary in the early stages of "figuring out" how to play, share, take turns and other socializing skills. Cooperation becomes an honored skill. A wide variety of adaptable materials and spaces are available for the child's free play choices. Students can choose to play both individually and in freely-formed and fluid play groups. In addition, during both indoor and outdoor free play times, adult-led small group activities are available including jump rope, gardening and a wide variety of crafts. The opportunity for free play plays a key and essential role in the curriculum as the child's nature changes from dreamy to focused and engaged over the span of their time in the Kindergarten, bringing them a sense of security, confidence and enthusiasm.

The ability to play creatively and use one's imagination in these early years becomes, over the course of grades one through eight, the ability to think creatively, imaginatively, actively, and effectively with increasing skill and conceptual precision, i.e.: solving complex problems in mathematics or drawing inferences accurately from scientific observations, or working together to solve a practical problem. Also, the extended focus on the task or play opportunity at hand, and the ability to create and follow an activity through to completion, are extremely important in later schooling and throughout life.

Practical Work

The children are involved in many aspects of the practical work involved in the smooth running of the Kindergarten. They set the table for snack, arrange the chairs in a circle on the rug for story time and move them back safely to the table for snack. They participate in food preparation and all take turns with the work of table cleaning, sweeping and dish washing. Outside, they help tend the garden and clean up play spaces.

When it is time to set up or clean, a child's observational powers and visual memory are developed. Organizational skills, sorting, staying on task and socially accomplishing a goal with others are all achieved. The younger child imitates the teacher and older children, developing habits of responsibility and a genuine feeling of self worth. The older child is given more individualized and challenging tasks. They are able to follow multiple step directions and see a complex job through from start to finish without an adult overseeing their work. They model willingness and flexibility and helping others for younger children.

Gardening

This is a foundational piece to science and an ecological education. The children develop a connection to the

earth and the seasons as they observe all of the changes in the garden and the weather. The children can observe the changing life of the garden, and best of all they get to eat what they have planted. They help to prepare the ground, plant the seeds and guide the younger children in caring for the plants. They learn to know which plants are ready to harvest, and how to help prepare the food. They develop reverence for the earth and the plants while tending them and noting the recurring life cycle of the garden as a whole and its inhabitants. This is an imaginative foundation for botany and ecology--providing images of natural processes, humanity's role in supporting them, and their blessings over time.

Music

Music is woven throughout the day and is often used for transitioning from one activity to the next. In addition to singing, the teacher and children often use simple instruments, such as chimes, harps, and wooden flutes. *Music lays the experiential foundation for the in-depth music curriculum that follows in the grades and for future studies in the arts, mathematics, and the sciences (number, rhythm, pitch, the study of sound and the qualities of materials).*

Mathematics

The daily Kindergarten routine introduces skills in mathematics in manifold ways, including counting and sorting, measuring, one to one correspondences in table setting etc., ordering from smallest to larger, finger plays, counting the children in the class, using number verses, sequential repetitive songs, jump rope verses, clapping games etc. The younger children are eager to participate in all of these activities as they imitate the involvement and skills of the older children.

Snack Time

Children help with all aspects of this shared mealtime, from preparing the food (*including natural whole grains, fresh vegetables and fruits, soups and homemade bread*), and ironing napkins, to cleaning the dishes and tables. Baking and cooking activities, like kneading dough, and stirring the cake batter, serve to integrate reflexes and hand-eye coordination in the younger child. The children are asked to sit and wait with quiet, good manners while everyone is served. This is essential for impulse control, social skills, self-care skills, and fine motor control. They learn community building skills and to care for others.

Outdoor Play

Similar to indoor creative play, the group is taken outdoors often to experience the natural world in all of its variety and its different seasons. *A child who has the experience of the yearly seasons can enter very deeply and comfortably into the later studies of plants and animals, the weather, geology, astronomy, and other natural sciences. Also, the opportunity for healthy movement offered in the outdoor setting is crucial to the healthy development of the young child.*

Story Time

The children are gathered together daily to hear the teacher tell a special story. The imaginative, vocabulary-rich story may be a fairy or folk tale from around the world, a nature tale, or a puppet show. Stories are repeated and worked with over an extended period of time so that the children may learn them well, and later act them out. Older children often assist in story time by playing the characters in the story or puppet show. The story will be acted out with feeling and the words will become even more alive in an appropriately

modulated, expressive shared context. These scenarios often become the basis for creative play at other times in the Kindergarten day.

The children learn to listen, remember and understand language in the rich context of story. These skills are fundamental to reading comprehension. Self-expression is enhanced through a rich contextualized understanding of new vocabulary.

Celebrations and Festivals

In addition to the daily activities described above, there is an ongoing celebration of the seasons. The mood of the season permeates all that we do in the Kindergarten. Annual celebrations and festivals become highlights of the year, for the Kindergarten and entire school community.

The Waldorf Kindergarten and Academic Learning

Directed academic instruction and activities are not emphasized in the Waldorf-methods Kindergarten; the emphasis lies on the foundation skills and experiences described above.

One key goal of the kindergarten program is to lay a strong foundation for the formal academic curriculum of the grades. Many preliminary academic skills are practiced daily. This material is not presented through formal academic lessons, but rather is embedded in the activities and rhythms of each day. The kindergarten program also allows children to fully develop their creativity, imagination, and self-confidence in preparation for the higher levels of cognitive thinking developed in the later grades.

For example, music, games and finger play develop rhythm and counting skills. The hands-on activities of gardening, cooking, nature walks, seasonal activities, etc., introduce science, math and geography skills, and concepts and vocabulary developed through classroom activities and stories. Multicultural stories give the child an introduction to social studies.

Social development and cooperative learning are also emphasized in kindergarten. In particular, acquiring the skills of concentration, courtesy, social habits, classroom habits and spatial awareness are important goals providing a strong foundation for future learning and for life.

Each day follows a regular and reassuring pattern and rhythm. Within the rhythm of each week, the children engage in these activities following a regular pattern: painting, baking, sewing, drawing, and beeswax modeling. Story, song, seasonal activities and celebrations carry us through the cycle of the natural year.

Foundational Learning through the Waldorf-Inspired Kindergarten Curriculum

The curriculum establishes solid foundations for work in the Grades in the following areas—as natural parts of the Kindergarten’s student activities:

- **Math:** The qualities of numbers; sorting and ordering; rhythm counting with movement and song; measuring in baking and cooking; woodworking
- **Language Arts:** fairy tales from around the world; singing; poetry recitation; with emphasis on the oral tradition; optionally, the upper case alphabet is introduced.
- **Science:** Cooking; baking; nature stories; nature walks; observations; gardening
- **History & Social Studies:** Multicultural stories; festivals; foods
- **Handwork:** Finger crocheting; sewing; cutting; pasting; drawing; seasonal crafts; woodworking (fine motor skills, foundation for concentration, speech and thinking)
- **Foreign Language:** Introduction to a foreign language, often Spanish, through songs and rhymes
- **Visual & Performing Arts:** Drawing; painting; beeswax modeling; drama; singing; percussion instruments; puppetry
- **Movement/Physical Education/Games:** Circle games; finger games; Eurythmy; jumping rope; climbing; outdoor imaginative play