

## Frequently Asked Questions About

### Waldorf (Steiner) Education

Located at [Steiner Schools in Australia](http://www.steiner-australia.org/)  
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#### What is Waldorf Education?

Waldorf education is a unique and distinctive approach to educating children that is practiced in Waldorf schools worldwide. Waldorf schools collectively form the largest, and quite possibly the fastest growing, group of independent private schools in the world. There is no centralised administrative structure governing all Waldorf schools; each is administratively independent, but there are established associations which provide resources, publish materials, sponsor conferences, and promote the movement.

#### What is unique about Waldorf Education? How is it different from other alternatives (Public Schooling, Montessori, etc.)?

The best overall statement on what is unique about Waldorf education is to be found in the stated goals of the schooling: "to produce individuals who are able, in and of themselves, to impart meaning to their lives".

The aim of Waldorf schooling is to educate the whole child, "head, heart and hands". The curriculum is as broad as time will allow, and balances academics subjects with artistic and practical activities.

Waldorf teachers are dedicated to creating a genuine love of learning within each child. By freely using arts and activities in the service of teaching academics, an internal motivation to learn is developed in the students, doing away with the need for competitive testing and grading.

Some distinctive features of Waldorf education include the following:

- Academics are de-emphasized in the early years of schooling. There is no academic content in the Waldorf kindergarten (i.e. pre-class 1) experience (although there is a good deal of cultivation of pre-academic skills), and minimal academics in class 1. The letters are introduced artistically in class 2, with the children learning to read from their own writing in class 2 or 3.
- During the primary school years (classes 1-8) the students have a class (or "main lesson") teacher who stays with the same class for (ideally) the first eight years of their schooling.
- Certain activities which are often considered "frills" at mainstream schools are central at Waldorf schools: art, music, gardening, and foreign languages (usually two in primary grades), to name a few. In the younger grades, all subjects are introduced through artistic mediums, because the children respond better to this medium than to dry lecturing and rote learning. All children learn to play recorder and to knit.
- There are no "textbooks" as such in the first through fifth grades. All children have "main lesson books", which are their own workbooks which they fill in during the course of the year. They essentially produce their own "textbooks" which record their experiences and what they've learned. Upper grades use textbooks to supplement their main lesson work.
- All children learn a stringed instrument from class 3 onwards. This often includes one-on-one tuition as well as orchestra.

- Learning in a Waldorf school is a non-competitive activity. There are no grades given at the primary level; the teacher writes a detailed evaluation of the child at the end of each school year.
- The use of electronic media, particularly television, by young children is strongly discouraged in Waldorf schools.

#### What is the curriculum at a Waldorf School like?

The Waldorf curriculum is designed to be responsive to the various phases of a child's development. The era of human history being studied corresponds in many ways with the stage of development of the child. For example, pre-class 1 children are presented with fairy stories matching their dreamy state of consciousness, class 4 study the Vikings and Norse mythology which suit their war-like feelings, class 5 learn of the Greeks at the time their intellect is awakening and their sense of fair play is becoming obvious, and so on.

The main subjects, such as history, language arts, science and mathematics are, as mentioned, taught in main lesson blocks of two to three hours per day, with each block lasting from three to five weeks.

The total Waldorf curriculum has been likened to an ascending spiral: subjects are revisited several times, but each new exposure affords greater depth and new insights into the subject at hand.

A typical Lower School curriculum would likely look something like the following:

- Primary Grades 1 - 3
  - - Pictorial introduction to the alphabet, writing, reading, spelling, poetry and drama.
    - Folk and fairy tales, fables, legends, Old Testament stories.
    - Numbers, basic mathematical processes of addition, subtraction, multiplication and division.
    - Nature stories, house building and gardening.
- Middle Grades 4 - 6
  - - Writing, reading, spelling, grammar, poetry and drama.
    - Norse myths, history and stories of ancient civilisations (e.g. Greek, Indian).
    - Review of the four mathematical processes, fractions, percentages, and geometry.
    - Local and world geography, comparative zoology, botany and elementary physics.
- Upper Grades 7 - 8
  - - Creative writing, reading, spelling, grammar, poetry and drama.
    - Medieval history, Renaissance, world exploration, history and biography.
    - Geography, physics, basic chemistry, astronomy, geology and physiology.
- Special subjects also taught include:
  - - Handwork: knitting, crochet, sewing, cross stitch, basic weaving, toy making and woodworking.
    - Music: singing, recorder, string instruments, wind, brass and percussion instruments.
    - Foreign Languages (varies by school): Spanish, French, Japanese and German.

- Art: wet-on-wet water colour painting, form drawing, beeswax and clay modelling, perspective drawing.
- Movement: eurhythmy, gymnastics, group games.

### **How did Waldorf education get started?**

In 1919, Rudolf Steiner, the Austrian philosopher, scientist and artist, was invited to give a series of lectures to the workers of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany. As a result, the factory's owner, Emil Molt, asked Steiner to establish and lead a school for the children of the factory's employees. Steiner agreed to do so on four conditions:

- The school should be open to all children;
- It should be coeducational;
- It should be a unified twelve-year school;
- The teachers, those who would be working directly with the children, should take the leading role in the running of the school, with a minimum of interference from governmental or economic concerns.

Molt agreed to the conditions and, after a training period for the prospective teachers, die Freie Waldorfschule (the Free Waldorf School) was opened September 7, 1919.

### **How many Waldorf Schools are there?**

Currently, there are more than 600 Waldorf schools in over 32 countries serving approximately 120,000 students. There are over 50 schools and Kindergartens currently operating in Australia, and about 125 in North America.

### **What is the philosophy behind Waldorf education?**

Consistent with his philosophy called Anthroposophy, Steiner designed a curriculum responsive to the developmental phases in childhood and nurturing of children's imagination. He thought that schools should cater to the needs of children rather than the demands of the government or economic forces, so he developed schools that encourage creativity and free-thinking.

### **Why should I send my child to a Waldorf school?**

The main reason is that Waldorf schools honour and protect the wonder of childhood. Every effort is expended to make Waldorf schools safe, secure and nurturing environments for the children, and to protect their childhood's from harmful influences from the broader society.

Secondly, Waldorf education has a consistent philosophy of child development underlying the curriculum. All subjects are introduced in an age-appropriate fashion.

Finally, Waldorf schools produce graduates who are academically advantaged with respect to their public school counterparts, and who consistently gain admission to top universities.

### **Who was Rudolf Steiner?**

Dr. Rudolf Steiner was a highly respected and well-published scientific, literary and philosophical scholar who was particularly known for his work on Goethe's scientific writings. He later came to incorporate his

scientific investigations with his interest in spiritual development. He became a forerunner in the field of spiritual-scientific investigation for the modern 20th century individual.

His background in history and civilisations coupled with his observation in life gave the world the gift of Waldorf Education. It is a deeply insightful application of learning based on the Study of Humanity with developing consciousness of self and the surrounding world.

### **How is reading taught in a Waldorf school? Why do Waldorf students wait until 2nd grade to begin learning to read?**

Waldorf education is deeply bound up with the oral tradition, typically beginning with the teacher telling the children fairy tales throughout kindergarten and first grade. The oral approach is used all through Waldorf education: mastery of oral communication is seen as being integral to all learning.

Reading instruction, as such, is deferred. Instead, writing is taught first. During the first grade the children explore how our alphabet came about, discovering, as the ancients did, how each letter's form evolved out of a pictograph. Writing thus evolves out of the children's art, and their ability to read likewise evolves as a natural and, indeed, comparatively effortless stage of their mastery of language.

### **Why is so much emphasis put on festivals and ceremonies?**

Seasonal festivals serve to connect humanity with the rhythms of nature and of the cosmos. The festivals originated in ancient cultures, yet have been adapted over time. To join the seasonal moods of the year, in a festive way, benefits the inner life of the soul. Celebrating is an art. There is joy in the anticipation, the preparation, the celebration itself, and the memories.

### **Why do Waldorf Schools discourage TV watching?**

The reasons for this have as much to do with the physical effects of the medium on the developing child as with the (to say the least) questionable content of much of the programming. Electronic media are believed by Waldorf teachers to seriously hamper the development of the child's imagination - a faculty which is believed to be central to the healthy development of the individual. Computer use by young children is also discouraged.

Waldorf teachers are not, by the way, alone in this belief. Several books have been written in recent years expressing concern with the effect of television on young children. See, for instance, *Endangered Minds* by Jane Healy, *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* by Jerry Mander, or *The Plug-In Drug* by Marie Winn.

### **What kind of training do Waldorf teachers have?**

While requirements within individual schools may vary, as a rule Class Teachers will have both their usual state teaching certification, as well as training from a recognised Waldorf teacher training college or institute. Some Waldorf training programs can also grant B.A. degrees in conjunction with Waldorf teaching certification. Typically, the course of study for teachers is one year full time, or two to three years part-time. This includes practice teaching in a Waldorf school under the supervision of experienced Waldorf teachers.

Rudolf Steiner, speaking in Oxford in 1922, defined "three golden rules" for teachers: "to receive the child in gratitude from the world it comes from; to educate the child with love; and to lead the child into the true freedom which belongs to man."

### **Why do Waldorf students stay with the same teacher for 8 years?**

Between the ages of seven and fourteen, children learn best through acceptance and emulation of authority, just as in their earlier years they learned through imitation. In primary school, particularly in the lower grades, the child is just beginning to expand his or her experience beyond home and family. The class becomes a type of "family" as well, with its own authority figure "the teacher" in a role analogous to parent.

With this approach, the students and teachers come to know each other very well, and the teacher is able to find over the years the best ways of helping individual children in their schooling. The class teacher also becomes like an additional family member for most of the families in his/her class.

It's worth noting that this approach was the norm in the days of the "little red schoolhouse".

### **How are personality conflicts between students and teachers handled?**

This is a very common concern among parents when they first hear about the "Class Teacher" method. However, in practice, the situation seems to arise very rarely, especially so when the teacher has been able to establish a relationship with the class right from the first grade. Incompatibility with a child is infrequent, as understanding the child's needs and temperament is central to the teacher's role and training. When problems of this sort do occur, the faculty as a whole works with the teacher and the family to determine and undertake whatever corrective action would be in the best interests of the child and of the class.

### **Are Waldorf schools religious?**

In the sense of subscribing to the beliefs of a particular religious denomination or sect, no. Waldorf schools, however, tend to be spiritually oriented and are based out of a generally Christian perspective. The historic festivals of Christianity, and of other major religions as well, are observed in the class rooms and in school assemblies. Classes in religious doctrine are not part of the Waldorf curriculum, and children of all religious backgrounds attend Waldorf schools. Spiritual guidance is aimed at awakening the child's natural reverence for the wonder and beauty of life.

### **How do Waldorf children fare when they transfer to "regular" schools? Is it true that once you start Waldorf schooling it is difficult to "fit in" to other schools?**

Generally, transitions to public schools, when they are anticipated, are not problematical. The most common transition is from a class eight Waldorf school to a more traditional high school, and, from all reports, usually takes place without significant difficulties.

Transitions in the lower grades, particularly between the first and fourth grades, can potentially be more of a problem, because of the significant differences in the pacing of the various curriculums. A second grader from a traditional school will be further ahead in reading in comparison with a Waldorf-schooled second grader; however, the Waldorf-schooled child will be ahead in arithmetic.

### **What is Anthroposophy?**

The term "Anthroposophy" comes from the Greek "anthropos-sophia" or "human wisdom". Steiner expanded an exacting scientific method by which one could do research for her/himself into the spiritual worlds. The investigation, known also as Spiritual Science is an obvious complement to the Natural Sciences we have come to accept. Through study and practiced observation, one awakens to his/her own inner nature and the spiritual realities of outer nature and the cosmos. The awareness of those relationships brings a greater reverence for all of life.

Steiner and many individuals since, who share his basic views, have applied this knowledge in various practical and cultural ways in communities around the world. Most notably, Waldorf schools have made significant impact on the world. Curative education, for mentally and emotionally handicapped adults and children, has established a deep understanding and work with people who have this difficult destiny. Bio-dynamic farming and gardening greatly expand the range of techniques available to organic agriculture. Anthroposophical medicine and pharmacy, although less widely known in Australia, are subjects of growing interest.

It should be stressed that while Anthroposophy forms the theoretical basis to the teaching methods used in Waldorf schools, it is not taught to the students.

Anthroposophy has its roots in the perceptions, already gained, into the spiritual world. Yet these are no more than the roots. The branches, leaves, blossoms, and fruits of Anthroposophy grow into all the fields of human life and action.

Rudolf Steiner

### **How does Waldorf deal with kids that are not so strong academically?**

Waldorf schools hesitate to categorise children, particularly in terms such as "slow" or "gifted". A given child's weaknesses in one area, whether cognitive, emotional or physical, will usually be balanced by strengths in another area. It is the teacher's job to try to bring the child's whole being into balance.

A child having difficulty with the material might be given extra help by the teacher or by parents; tutoring might also be arranged. Correspondingly, a child who picked up the material quickly might be given harder problems of the same sort to work on, or might be asked to help a child who was having trouble.

### **How well do Waldorf graduates do on standard tests? How well do Waldorf high school graduates do in tertiary education?**

To the best of our knowledge, no controlled studies have been done on these questions, but anecdotal evidence collected from various sources would seem to suggest that Waldorf graduates tend to score toward the high end on standardised examinations. As far as higher education goes, Waldorf graduates have been accepted as students at, and have graduated from, some of the most prestigious colleges and universities in Australia.

### **What is Eurhythmymy?**

Most simply put, eurhythmymy is a dance-like art form in which music or speech are expressed in bodily movement; specific movements correspond to particular notes or sounds. It has also been called "visible speech" or "visible song". Eurhythmymy is part of the curriculum of all Waldorf schools, and while it often puzzles parents new to Waldorf education, children respond to its simple rhythms and exercises which help them strengthen and harmonise their body and their life forces; later, the older students work out elaborate eurhythmic representations of poetry, drama and music, thereby gaining a deeper perception of the compositions and writings. Eurhythmymy enhances coordination and strengthens the ability to listen. When children experience themselves like an orchestra and have to keep a clear relationship in space with each other, a social strengthening also results.

Eurhythmymy is usually taught by a specialist who has been specifically trained in eurhythmymy, typically for at least four years. In addition to pedagogical eurhythmymy, there are also therapeutic ("curative") and performance-oriented forms of the art.

## **Acknowledgements**

This article is based on one originating from Lefty's site I have altered it slightly so it is more Australian oriented.

## **Recommended Reading**

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