Steiner Waldorf education is 100 years old! It is founded on the work of the Austrian philosopher and educator Rudolf Steiner, who wished to create a form of education that would help pupils achieve “clarity of thought, sensitivity of feeling and strength of will”. After listening to Steiner’s lectures to the workers at the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Emil Molt, the director, asked him to form a school for their children, and in 1919 the first Waldorf school was founded. Today there are more than 1,000 schools and almost 2,000 kindergartens in over 65 countries, serving children from birth to 18 years of age.

Steiner spoke about the developmental stages spanning 7-year periods. The phase of early childhood (the first 7 years) includes parenting, home childcare and pregnancy, baby groups – which may include the Pikler approach – parent-and-child groups (birth to age 3), playgroups, nursery groups (ages 2 to 4), and day care and childminding where an understanding of the Steiner Waldorf approach is developed before the child starts kindergarten (ages 3 to 6+).
KEY PEDAGOGICAL PRINCIPLES

Steiner Waldorf education is based on the notion that everything visible and invisible has an impact on the child. Its holistic view takes account of the whole child, and believes that children’s learning flourishes in a calm, peaceful, predictable, familiar and unhurried environment that recognises the child’s sensory sensitivities.
The whole child

The Steiner curriculum values 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 7 is therefore integrated and not subject-based. For example, mathematics and use of mathematical language 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! Concepts such as addition and subtraction (or more and less), weight, measure, quantity and shape are grasped in a practical manner as part of daily life, in an oral-rich environment where stories are told by heart and puppet shows, music, movement, poetry and rhyme are valued and integrated. Children are able to tell stories by ‘reading’ the pictures in a book; this develops imagination and verbal skills and frees the narrative from the printed text, encouraging children to use their own words. Children also act or perform puppet shows and develop dramatic skills through working with narrative and dialogue. 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 and an artistic sense for colour and form. The integration of these activities cultivates a love of language, develops speech and allows children time to become really familiar with the spoken word.

Play is a young child’s work

In our settings the children are given opportunities for child-led free play (both indoors and outdoors), play arising out of their 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 they have seen or experienced. There is little or no adult interference in the play. It strengthens the imagination – essential for scientific exploration – and helps learning through investigation, exploration and discovery. The children exercise and consolidate their ability to understand and think and to develop and strengthen concentration. Creative play supports physical, emotional and social development and enables self-regulation. It encourages children to become inventive and adaptable.

‘Doing’ is learning

We are a community of ‘doers’, and through ‘work’ the young children not only learn social and domestic life skills, but also through these 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. Young children learn for life from life, through following processes – planting the seed, tending the plants, harvesting and cooking the food, which is served to all, and then cleaning, washing up, and composting or feeding the breadcrumbs to the birds. What better way of embedding the skills we need for life and developing a respectful and reverent attitude, caring for ourselves, each other and the earth?

Rhythm and repetition are crucial

Regular patterns of activities create routine, 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. Emphasis is therefore given to regular patterns of activities repeated within the day, week and year to provide rhythm and routine.

Repetition helps to support good habits and reinforce behaviour – we always wash hands before eating, or put on appropriate clothing to go outdoors – and it is never questioned or made conscious. Every day has its own rhythms, which support the day’s activities – for example, a ‘tidy up’ song 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. Repeated 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. There are moments of reverence each day when the children associate the mood with stillness, awe and wonder, such as saying a blessing on our food at mealtime, followed by sociable conversation and awareness of others, ensuring that everyone has a share of the food, and listening other children’s ‘news’. Seasonal or cultural festivals provide the opportunity to create a special joyful and celebratory mood, and usually involve other family members. Birthdays are important events, where the parents provide the ‘birthday story’ based on the child’s life, which is told at a special birthday ceremony to which families are invited.
The teaching method and working with parents

Teachers are 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 in front of a young child, but also how one does it. The teachers work with an image of the child as a spiritual being bearing gifts, and it is the task of the adults (teachers and parents) to help the child to unwrap these gifts as the child develops. They provide a nurturing, warm and secure environment and 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 of 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 – a wonderful example to the ever-watchful child.

Working with parents is an important part of putting the child at the centre. Through sharing the ethos of the approach, providing parent interaction and education in the form of craft groups, parent evenings where areas of the curriculum are discussed, or during festivals and celebrations, a sense of community is woven around the child.

KEY PEDAGOGICAL PRIORITIES

The Steiner approach believes that young children benefit from an unhurried and stress-free environment where there is time to discover the world around them and to master social interaction, self-regulation, physical coordination, speech, language and other life skills before abstract learning and formal schooling are introduced at rising 7. A broad, rich curriculum and an oral approach to literacy form the basis for a rich literacy foundation. Digital technology is not encouraged until later, when the child has embedded these basic skills.
The most important thing, though, is the intention to provide a timeless, rich and supportive early childhood experience for young children, where they can experience themselves and others and grow in peace and harmony, where they are not under pressure to perform or compete, and where they weave a tapestry of learning experiences. This is the Steiner approach to early childhood.

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FIND OUT MORE

Understanding the Steiner Waldorf Approach (Early Years Education in Practice series) by Janni Nicol and Jill Tina Taplin, Routledge

The Genius of Play: Celebrating the Spirit of Childhood by Sally Jenkinson, Hawthorn Press

Free to Learn: Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Care and Education by Lynne Oldfield, Hawthorn Press

You Are Your Child's First Teacher: Encouraging Your Child's Natural Development from Birth to Age Six by Rahima Baldwin Dancy, Hawthorn Press

A list of Steiner-inspired childminders, kindergartens and schools and additional information including links can be found at www.steinerwaldorf.org