

Caring for Children from Birth to Three

Society has seen far-reaching changes in the last years. These changes are due to many factors increasing the number of children under three needing part or full-time care.

Waldorf teachers, together with those who carry responsibility for a school, center or home-based program, must find ways to care for the child in the first three years with particular care and consideration. What young children need and what has been discovered by research into early child development need to be taken into account and applied in practice.

Child-care centers, Waldorf schools and home-based programs are deepening their understanding of the unique needs of the child from birth to three. In order to properly meet the needs of these youngest children, important factors are considered. The guiding principles for this work are a focused understanding of the four lower senses: the sense of touch, the sense of balance, the sense of self-movement and the sense of life. These senses are strengthened and supported through secure and nurturing relationships based on respect for the child; loving and rhythmic care practices; attention to the development of speech; supporting the life forces through physical and soul warmth; ample time for spacious exploration of the environment, indoors as well as outdoors; transparent daily rhythms with particular attention to sleeping and waking; and nourishing mealtimes.

Practical Considerations

Daily Rhythm

The slow pace within which the young child lives and moves is the foundation of a supportive daily rhythm. The simpler and more spacious the day for the child, the more the child will thrive. The daily rhythm for the youngest children allows ample time for dressing, diapering, feeding or mealtimes, times for movement and times for rest, times for closeness with their caregivers and time for free, uninterrupted play. For the child under three, the day flows from one bodily care need to another. The rhythm of the day allows ample time for each of these needs.

There are many ways to configure groups of young children. Careful study of young children's needs informs our program planning. Each school or program has local regulations that may determine maximum group size according to available square footage, age range, and adult: child ratio. A predictable, consistent rhythm promotes health and well-being, deepens the children's trust in their caregivers and the environment, and allows them to be at ease in play and group activity.

The world of Waldorf early childhood education and care is opening itself to varied and

exciting new possibilities for forming the daily rhythm. Strong influences include the well-established work of Helle Heckmann, Emmi Pikler, LifeWays, Bernadette Raichle, and others. While the needs of young children and the key role of a “breathing” rhythm are central in the work of all Waldorf early childhood educators, there are diverse approaches to serving these needs and supporting healthy development. This variety creates opportunities for individual study and research.

Below is one example of mixed age early childhood daily rhythm:

Early Morning Mixed age care: 4 months to 5 years old.

7:30 - 8:30 Children arrive, all to one room (baby room connected, but with a door.) Free Play. The children arriving at 7:30 gather in one area but are later in groupings and spaces dedicated to their age and developmental stage.

8:20: At this time the children go to their own rooms by age grouping. Meal preparation is occurring in both rooms.

Children 18 months to 2.9 years:

9:00: morning meal

9:30: one teacher diapers while the other is tidying the room

9:50 - 10:10: dressing for outside, outdoor play

11:00: undressing, diapering and hand washing

11:20: lunch

11:40: song and fingerplays

11:50: nap

1:30 - 2:00: waking up

2:00 - 2:50: diapering, free play, prepare afternoon meal

3:00: afternoon meal (Second outdoor playtime if the weather is not too cold.)

4:00 – 5:30: Pickup

Enrollment Considerations

Children under three have specific needs in regard to the caregiver-to-child ratio. Most states will have regulations that determine maximum group size according to square footage, age range and adult/child ratio. Each institution or program will work within the guidelines of their state or region while creating their programs.

For Schools: The decision to accept children under the age of three merits the participation and approval of the entire teaching faculty and board. In order to be successful, the undertaking must be carried and supported by the whole community. Many school communities are considering accepting younger children into their early childhood programs. It is essential to the child’s wellbeing that the decision to accept a child under three is a conscious one. Changes to the programs currently offered and the development of new programs based on the needs of the child are essential.

A committee of early childhood educators often determines the number of children in each group in a school or center program. Sometimes the committee makes proposals to a school leadership body or includes someone from this body in their deliberations, and this group may be responsible for the final decision regarding group size. In either case, early childhood faculty representation is essential.

The following is a suggested framework for creating healthy mixed age groups:

Mixed-age groups for children 2 to 6 years

Some Waldorf early childhood programs are exploring mixed-aged classrooms that welcome children under three. As noted above, this is a very significant decision and one that should be undertaken only with the utmost consideration for the needs of the children. It is important that no one age of child be isolated in a group. Balanced groupings include three children of each developmental phase. If it is not possible to meet these conditions, then this kind of group is not recommended.

- 12 - 14 children, with a maximum of three children under the age of three
- Educator-to-child ratio: 2 educators to 12-14 children. In some cases, a third caregiver may be needed.

Groups with children age 1 to 3

- 8 - 10 children
- Educator-child ratio: 2 educators to 8-10 children

Groups of children aged birth to 3

- 6 - 10 children max. It has proved successful to separate the children into a group of birth to 1½-year-olds and a group of 1½ to 3-year-olds. Ideally, there is a separate area for children who are not yet walking.
- **This recommended number of 10 children must not be exceeded.**
- Educator-to-child ratio: 1 educators to every three children, with a maximum of 1:4.

Physical Space Considerations

In addition to a physical space that is harmonizing, uncluttered and predictable the young child has bodily-care needs that necessitate specific furnishings.

A diapering area that offers protection to the very young children is an integral part of the room. This area is often separated from the play area by a half door. A standing diapering table is appropriate for children who are of walking age. The diapering area must have running water and proper storage for the child's diapering needs.

The physical space should offer opportunities for large and small gross motor play and ample space for active play. Sufficient space for younger and older children in a mixed-aged class is needed, as well as separate areas that offer protected spaces for movement, play and self-initiated rest.

Training and Qualifications

Suggested for Working with the Very Young Child

For early childhood educators who carry responsibility for the care and education of the child from birth to school entrance, completion of a Waldorf early childhood teacher education program recognized by WECAN (Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America) is expected. If the educator has completed a 450-hour training that did not include a strong focus on the child under four, additional specialized professional development coursework in birth to three is expected for those working as lead teachers or caregivers.

Essential qualities for working as a Waldorf early childhood educator that are cultivated through professional training and lifelong professional development include:

- Love and respect for children as spiritual individuals who bring with them their own destinies and gifts
- The ability to create nurturing environments that support the needs of the young child
- A commitment to life-long self-development in becoming a model worthy of imitation by the child.
- Skills for building collaborative relationships with parents and colleagues.

Resources on Working with the Child from Birth to Three

A Warm and Gentle Welcome, T. Atchison and M. Ris, ed.

Childhood-Creating a Home for Body, Soul and Spirit, Bernadette Raichle

Nokken, A Garden for Children: A Danish Approach to Waldorf-Based Child Care, by Helle Heckmann

On the Play of the Child, Freya Jaffke, ed.

Working with the Angels, Susan Howard, ed.

“The Essentials of Waldorf Early Childhood Education”, Susan Howard, in: *Mentoring in Waldorf Early Childhood Education*; and reprinted in *Gateways*, Fall/Winter 2006, Issue 51

“The Importance of Sleep” - Susan R. Johnson, MD. *Gateways*. Spring/Summer 2001, Issue 40

The Incarnating Child, Joan Salter

Loczy, An Unusual Approach to Mothering, Dr. M. David and G. Appell

Beyond the Rainbow Bridge, B. Patterson and P. Bradley

The Child From Birth to Three in Waldorf Education and Child Care, R. Patzlaff, C. McKeen, I. von Mackensen and C. Grah-Wittich

Trust and Wonder, Eldbjorg Gjessing Paulsen