

# Waikato Waldorf School

*...developing the whole child*



## What is Waldorf Education?

Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner founded the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart, Germany in 1919. Based on his philosophy called Anthroposophy (Greek for human wisdom), Steiner designed a curriculum responsive to the developmental phases in childhood and the nurturing of independent thought and imagination. He thought that schools should address the needs of children rather than the demands of government or economic forces, so he developed schools that encourage creativity and free thinking.

There are now over 1000 Waldorf schools in 38 countries, and Waldorf education is among the largest and fastest growing independent education movements in the world.

**“Our highest endeavour must be to develop free human beings who are able of themselves to impart purpose and meaning on their lives”**

**Rudolf Steiner**

## What is unique about Waldorf Education?

The signature of a Waldorf education is that the curiosity of childhood has been rewarded and nurtured into a passion for discovery and learning that is genuine and internally driven.

Children are immersed in a range of subjects across the entire human experience. They do not focus exclusively on intellectual pursuits, but tackle practical, hands-on activities and artistic endeavours as complements to their academic development.

Waldorf schools encourage self-motivation, independent thinking and creative problem solving in an environment that allows children to become confident expressing their own ideas.

As children mature and become comfortable with the essential learning structures provided by a teacher-centred approach, they move toward a student (or individual)-centred approach to learning. In a Waldorf school children become increasingly free as they develop. They learn to create solutions rather than replicate them: to think rather than memorize. They learn that initiative, not compliance, is rewarded.

## **What is the curriculum at a Waldorf school like?**

The Waldorf curriculum is designed to be responsive to the various phases of child development. The relationship between student and teacher is, likewise, recognized to be both crucial and changing throughout the course of childhood and early adolescence.

The main subjects, such as history, language arts, science and mathematics are taught in main lesson blocks of two 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.

## **Why is reading taught later in Waldorf schools?**

At Waldorf schools children are engaged in activities that develop their spatial awareness and motor skills - hand movement for turning pages, head and eye movement for scanning a line. Listening and speaking skills are also emphasized and are essential foundations that should precede the introduction of reading and writing.

This developmentally appropriate approach to literacy education defies the convention of teaching very young children to read and write. Waldorf educators feel that the popular push for early reading is done at the expense of the full development of pre-literacy aptitudes that are essential for the effective development of true literacy and use of language in the long term,

This approach also has the benefit of engaging children to a point where they feel a genuine, deep connection with the written and spoken word. Language becomes a part of who they are. They enliven it in their daily lives and it becomes much more than a mere tool or superficial symbol devoid of meaning or true value.

While children who are taught to read at a very young age may make superficial associations that equip them to sound out and recognize letters and words, they may lack understanding of what they are reading, and are less likely to fully develop the capacity to internalize, comprehend, and visualize written information.

At Waldorf schools we do not force early reading and writing, opting instead to nurture pre-literacy skills that provide solid foundations for meaningful literacy instruction when the child is ready.

## **Why do Waldorf School discourage television for young children?**

Waldorf education is not anti-television. It would be unrealistic not to acknowledge the value and importance of technological media in our culture. Waldorf does have legitimate concerns; however, about the extensive impact these media have on child development.

While vigorous debate has covered the content of television programming, less has been said of the damage done by the nature of the medium itself whether the

programming is educational or not, the damage is done by the intensity and focused nature of the stimulus.

Recent studies have repeatedly documented the damage done by television to children's neurological, perceptual and sensory development. Children in the modern world are hyper-stimulated by passively absorbed stimuli in their daily lives. This impacts upon the development of a vast number of fundamental skills, such as the capacity to engage interactively with their world, to imagine, to create, to think critically, to interact socially, to develop self-esteem, and to entertain themselves.

Aside from concerns around the damage done to a children's capacity for engagement in the real world, Waldorf schools discourage television viewing for young children for another reason.

For the purpose of nourishing important foundations for observing and thinking, Waldorf educators have found that electronic stimulation does not have the same power to challenge, engage and reward as does real, immersive stimulus.

To see all of the creatures at the pond in a tightly edited clip on a nature channel is not the same as being genuinely surprised by a jumping fish or struggling to hold on to a slippery frog. At a Waldorf school it is felt that children need to go to the real pond. It is essential that children be engaged by the real world rather than being placated by superficial, artificial and sanitized simulations that are essentially intellectually and emotionally unfulfilling.

There is also this to consider — What about all the things children are **not** doing or experiencing while they are watching television?

## Why are computers not used in Waldorf schools?

For many of the same reasons Waldorf education discourages television viewing for young children, Waldorf does not follow the popular trend of introducing young children to computers.

Introduction of technological devices is carefully controlled in Waldorf classrooms because children need to fully develop visualization, conceptualization, and abstract and logical thinking skills before they can fully appreciate and benefit from the use of technology.

Waldorf educators understand the irony that the very thinking skills that lead to adult success in computer use can be undermined by the introduction of computers in elementary education.

Creativity, logical thinking, conceptual processing, outside-the-box perspective and many other advantages software designers will rhyme off,

when asked what they look for in employees, are not as well served by looking at a screen and clicking a mouse as they are by other more immersive, interactively challenging and multifaceted sensory learning experiences.

With the understanding that computers are an essential aspect of our modern world, Waldorf education lays a solid foundation by ennobling logical thinking and reasoning aptitudes that will provide an edge to children who grow to think in ways that allow them to capitalize on the tools offered by technology.

## **“Computer Science is no more about Computers than Astronomy is about telescopes**

- E. W. Dijkstra

### **Why do students stay with the same teacher through the elementary years?**

Waldorf education is first and foremost about empowering the individual. Waldorf teachers want children to learn to feel comfortable offering their own ideas and perspectives rather than parroting cookie cutter responses in standardized environments.

In order for children to develop the confidence it takes to offer their voice to a group, they must feel a certain degree of comfort and emotional security. This security is well served by the stable relationship provided by having one main teacher throughout the early years of their education.

Another benefit of the main-teacher aspect of Waldorf Education is that the teacher acquires an extensive understanding of the student's strengths, weaknesses, personality and unique learning style. In the early years while children are internalizing the structures that will allow them to become effective self-initiating learners, a Waldorf education is highly teacher centred. During this time it is extremely beneficial for a teacher to understand a student's learning needs over a longer span of time than is available to teachers in other systems.

### **Why is there no testing or grading in the early years?**

Nurturing a child's natural curiosity into a lifelong passion for learning is something that must be done gently. Our society's tendency to quantify the educational experience and measure children against each other can have damaging effects on young children's self-esteem, willingness to offer their own ideas, and growth as confident, independently thinking students. In popular education models where young children are tested and graded, children learn very quickly to give the “cookie cutter” answer and to think “inside the box.” The “Test and Grade” approach also leads to development of adversarial relationships between students and teachers, students and other students, and students and school in general. School becomes work. The teacher becomes the boss. Classmates become the competition.

While grading is introduced in the senior grades (6, 7, and 8) to prepare students for secondary school, Waldorf educators feel that testing and grading are not appropriate for young students and are more detrimental than beneficial. Waldorf teachers opt instead to offer constructive feedback to students and employ frequent anecdotal reports to parents to monitor student progress.

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

The high level of parent-teacher interaction at a Waldorf school is one of its defining characteristics. Because parents and their child's main class teacher work together over many years, they often develop an almost familial relationship.

As in any relationship, there are bound to be ups and downs. Teacher- student conflicts, like parent-child conflicts, are healthy, natural aspect of child development and are most often short-term events. It is actually one of the benefits of having the same teacher that children develop skills to work through the disagreements that sometimes arise in life.

Ongoing conflict between students and teachers, or parents and teachers, are an unusual occurrence at a Waldorf school, and when they arise they are taken seriously.

In the event that a conflict cannot be resolved through parental and teacher involvement, there is a system of review that involves the parents, the faculty, and the school administration.

It should be considered that most Waldorf teachers have done their job for many years without experiencing ongoing student-teacher conflict. They have extensive experience understanding children's feelings and have made a career of fostering a wonder filled and nurturing environment for children to thrive in — intellectually and emotionally.

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

Waldorf educators feel strongly that specific religious education should be a function of family and home.

Waldorf schools do, however, nurture development of an individual spiritual life through nurturing a respect for the natural world, an appreciation of natural and artistic beauty, and an understanding of the diversity and complexity of human cultures and world views.

Children are encouraged to develop their own spiritual impulse and to respect the varying beliefs of people in their communities. They are introduced to a variety of seasonal festivals in order to help them learn about the rich spiritual tapestry that is woven from the world's religions.

### **How do children do when they transfer from a Waldorf school to a regular elementary school?**

Generally, transitions to public schools, when they are anticipated, go smoothly.

Transitions in the lower grades, particularly between the first and fourth grades, can potentially be more of a problem, because of variation in the pacing of the various curriculum's. A second grader from a traditional school may be further ahead in reading than a Waldorf-schooled second grader; however, a Waldorf-schooled child will likely be ahead in arithmetic.

By Grades Four or Five transfers are much easier, as Waldorf students in the intermediate and senior elementary grades are often further advanced in studies than students in other systems.

## **How do children do when they transfer from a Waldorf elementary school to a regular secondary school?**

Waldorf students do very well in traditional high schools, often representing the very picture of the well-rounded student.

Because they have become self-initiating learners who dig far below the superficial aspects of course materials, they often impress their teachers with the breadth of their range of knowledge and the depth of their understanding of all aspects of a subject.

Because they have developed confidence and a strong sense of self, they offer their voice freely in the classroom and in social and community activities.

The hallmark of a Waldorf graduate is the ability, when confronted with the unknown or new subject material, to quickly assess it, understand it, personalize it and apply it.

Traditional secondary school teachers also note that Waldorf students very often display an uncommonly strong interest in their studies and actively seek out new material and opportunities to learn on their own.

## **How do Waldorf schools address children with learning and physical disabilities?**

The special needs of incoming students are assessed very carefully at a Waldorf school. Teachers must be certain that an incoming student would not only benefit from being in a Waldorf environment, but would also fit into the educational and social dynamic of their class. They must also weigh the impact of a new student's needs on their existing student group, some of whom may also have special needs.

The culture of a Waldorf school is built around the idea that society reaps the benefits of the variety of gifts, talents and perspectives that arises when we empower individuals to grow into the people they wish to become.

Understanding that all individuals are unique has fostered the development of a curriculum that inherently accommodates the widest possible variety of learning styles. Course materials are presented in a way that simultaneously provides access by visual, auditory and tactile-kinesthetic learners.

Because student ownership of what they learn is such an important part of deepening the understanding and retention of what is studied, students are active participants in how their material is learned. Preparation of their own textbooks is an example of this approach. Under guidance from a teacher who has an opportunity to spend years with the same student in a comparatively small class, students not only come to accept the unique way they themselves learn, they are encouraged to develop their capacities to learn in that way.

This approach is true of the Waldorf approach to physical and learning disabilities. Waldorf educators understand that their classrooms are enriched by a broader variety of perspectives.

Albert Einstein, Thomas Edison, Sir Winston Churchill, Henry Ford all had learning disabilities and were 'failing' students. When unique insights are acknowledged rather than discouraged, when encouragement is valued over assimilation, and when

children are educated in a way that addresses the way they see the world, then not conforming to the standard can become an asset rather than a liability.

### **Why is emphasis placed on movement and physical activity?**

Aside from the obvious benefits derived from physical activity, movement in classroom activities is also used to reinforce the learning process.

We can all recall experiences where physical emphasis has reinforced our attempts to deepen our memory or understanding of learned material (memorizing lines in a play by walking back and forth, for example).

Currently, 30 to 40 per cent of students are kinesthetic learners who need to be involved in an activity in order to effectively process abstract information.

### **Why are handwork courses such an important part of the Waldorf curriculum?**

The Waldorf curriculum is also unique in that it offers practical handwork instruction in disciplines such as knitting, sewing, tailoring, gardening and woodworking.

The fine-motor development, perceptual acuity, ability to focus on task, logical problem solving and commitment to high personal standards developed through these endeavours inevitably resonates through long term performance in academic subjects.

The experience of creating useful everyday items by hand not only imparts a respect for quality and craftsmanship, it is an extremely empowering act that elicits a sense of control. For this reason it is beneficial to the development of a strong sense of independence and confidence.

### **Why are art and music emphasized in the Waldorf curriculum?**

In a Waldorf school, the arts are not a distinct program offered in addition to academic subjects, they are integrated into the entire curriculum as a means to deepening understanding and retention of academic material.

Not only have many studies shown that music and arts education contribute to the development of conceptual thinking and mathematical skills, the presentation and performance aspects of these activities also impart self-confidence.

The arts are also important to the Waldorf curriculum because Waldorf educators feel strongly that children learn better when their emotional and feeling life becomes part of the learning process. Art elicits an emotional connection to academic work that deepens awareness, understanding, appreciation and retention of the material being studied.

The act of creating also empowers students to feel ownership of what they learn and know. This not only goes a long way to increasing understanding and retention, it also instils a strong sense of self and the confidence to maintain it in the face of a world that attempts to impress conformity and compliance on many levels.

**Where the spirit does not work with the hand  
there is no art”**

**Leonardo da Vinci**

### **Why are outdoor activities, eco awareness and respect for nature so important in the Waldorf curriculum?**

Waldorf schools not only strive to graduate students who are self-initiating, compassionate, creative and academically strong, they also aspire to instill a capacity for true self-fulfilment and enjoyment of life. Part of instilling this capacity involves forging a strong connection to the natural world.

Waldorf school experience suggests that the visual, auditory and tactile richness that comprises the great outdoors is a much more fertile place for meaningful education to begin than the comparatively featureless, sterile and contrived environments where many of us spend most of our time.

Nature offers an uncertainty and a spontaneity that nurtures strength of character, self-reliance and confidence. Recovering from an uncertain step; the unexpected sighting of a rabbit on a path; the joy of dirty hands that are washed clean later; discovering and caring for a wounded bird; planting, nurturing, harvesting, preparing and eating your own food: These things are the real world and leave spiritual and intellectual imprints on us that last throughout and enrich our lives.

Think of your fondest childhood memories. How many of them involved a shopping mall, restaurant or television show and how many involved something you encountered outside?

**“If one way be better than another, that you can  
be sure is Nature’s way”**

**- Aristotle**

### **Are there any empirical studies available that measure the value of a Waldorf education against other education models?**

There have been many studies that show the relative value of Waldorf education, especially as it relates to creative thinking.

You can find an extensive list of these studies at:

<http://www.waldorfanswers.org/Studies.htm>

### **How much will it cost for my child to attend a Waldorf school?**

Waikato Waldorf School is a registered non-profit organization that operates on a cost-recovery, not-for-profit basis.

Kindergarten programs range from \$600 to \$3,000 a year, depending on the number of days a week a child attends.

School tuition is for the 1<sup>st</sup> child in family \$3,200 and subsequent child \$2,600 a year.

## **How does Waldorf education prepare children for the future?**

CEO's of major businesses place creativity, divergent thinking, the ability to adapt to various cultures and work environments, and a willingness to learn, high on the list of essential qualities they look for in employees.

Increasing automation of the production economy, technology-driven streamlining of the information economy and the increasingly dynamic nature of the economy in general, mean that our children are going to have to change careers frequently, or do their own thing, in a future that will be defined by contract employees, freelancers and entrepreneurs.

Whether they are the citizens of a utopian or dystopian world of tomorrow, the ability to adapt, a curiosity that propels them to seek out and master new ideas, a perspective to offer innovative solutions to problems, and a commitment to social improvement and a strong respect for the natural world will be the gifts Waldorf graduates bring to the world of tomorrow.

By giving our children the advantage of a Waldorf education we not only improve their chances for success, we improve the outlook for us all.

**“The problems that exist in the world today  
cannot be solved by employing the way of  
thinking that created them”**

**Albert Einstein**