

WHY WALDORF?

AN INTRODUCTION TO WALDORF EDUCATION

The trustees and teachers of the Nairobi Waldorf School Trust are delighted you are interested in Waldorf education for your child. Our goal is to give pupils a desire and love for learning, which will stay with them throughout their school and university years and lay the foundation for academic excellence, vocational achievement, and social success.

From its beginnings 100 years ago, Waldorf education has spread across the globe. With more than 1,500 schools and kindergartens in 50 countries, it is the fastest growing independent school movement in the world. We are proud to be part of this growth and our contribution in establishing Waldorf education in East Africa.

Driven by the energy of a small group of pioneering parents who started our first non-profit primary school in 2000 with only four children, we are now a thriving multi-cultural community with more than thirty teaching faculty and support personnel serving over two hundred and thirty children across our campuses in Karen and Lavington.

This information packet about the school has been prepared in a question and answer format, which we hope will guide you through the issues most frequently faced by parents thinking about Waldorf education for their children. Our qualified teaching staff, mentors, and support personnel will also happily clarify any additional questions you may have.

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WHAT IS WALDORF EDUCATION?

Waldorf education was developed at the beginning of the 20th century by Austrian philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). His ideas were first used in a school he was commissioned to set up for the children of workers at the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory opened in 1919 in Stuttgart, Germany.

Steiner's education approach is inspired by his broader philosophy and teachings, called anthroposophy (literally, wisdom or knowledge of man). It derives its life from an understanding that each human being - endowed with profound spiritual, moral, and physical capacities - is instinctively driven to seek a broadly fulfilled and balanced life. It is in this sense of breadth and wholeness where the core of the Waldorf approach lies.

Waldorf education and teaching methods are designed to stimulate and nurture both the academic and inner creative capacities of a child, which come alive and active at recognized different stages of their intellectual and social development. A Waldorf school's curriculum is structured to reflect these developmental stages and teachers strive to awaken and develop each child's individual, in-born abilities and talent throughout each phase of growth.

For instance, during the kindergarten years, play, fantasy, imitation, and adult example are the focus of all activities and are encouraged through storytelling, games and structured play. These are critical in establishing a healthy foundation for the cognitive and analytical skills the child will require in later years.

Primary school teaching methods are designed to convey information both academically and experientially and embrace an artistic and creative approach to stimulate a deep understanding of 'technical' subjects such as mathematics and the sciences, and emphasized in the 'art' subjects, english, history, and geography. These core subjects are taught in main lesson blocks of two hours per day, with each block lasting approximately three weeks.

Special subjects are spread across the timetable. Waldorf pupils learn two foreign languages, study art, and practice music. Boys and girls knit, sew, and tailor together in handwork classes and saw, file, and hammer together in woodwork lessons. 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.

Underpinning the Waldorf approach is a desire to foster and empower a child's own sense of self-discovery as the powerful driving force, which sends young Waldorf graduates out into the real world with an inner balance and confidence, along with academic knowledge and practical skills to meet life and all its possibilities.

Waldorf education is distinguished from mainstream and other education options primarily by the de-emphasizing of academic discipline in the early years of schooling. There is no academic content in the Waldorf kindergarten experience - although there is a good deal of cultivation of pre-academic skills - and minimal academics in Class One. Literacy readiness begins in kindergarten with formal reading instruction beginning in Class One. Most children are reading independently by the middle or end of Class Two.

Subjects such as art, music, gardening, and languages, are often considered "frills" at mainstream schools. These learning components are central at Waldorf schools. In the younger classes, all subjects are introduced through artistic and tactile mediums, as the children respond better to this medium than to dry lecturing and rote learning.

Learning in a Waldorf school is a non-competitive activity. There are no exams or marks given at the primary level. Wherever possible children are taught by the same class teacher throughout primary school and the special bond created between pupil and teacher allows a teacher deeper insights into a child's abilities and achievements. These are detailed in a year-end evaluation prepared for each child.

There are no "textbooks" as such in the first through fifth classes. All children have "main lesson books", their own workbooks in which they create during the course of the year. They essentially produce their own "textbooks" which record their experiences and what they have learned. Upper classes may use textbooks to supplement skills development, especially in maths, science, and grammar.

HOW IS READING TAUGHT IN A WALDORF SCHOOL?

Waldorf education works on the premise that up to the age of 7 a child is busy completing the formation of his physical body. The child's 'work' at this time is play, which ensures the natural development of the brain as well as both the fine and gross motor skills. These skills, which include the coordination of both hemispheres of the brain, are the prerequisites for reading and writing readiness.

Waldorf education is also deeply bound up with oral tradition, typically beginning with the teacher telling the children fairy tales throughout kindergarten and class one, and sustained throughout primary school with mastery of oral communication being integral to all learning.

Writing is taught first. During class one 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 evolves as a natural and comparatively effortless stage of their mastery of language.

WHY IS ART SO IMPORTANT?

By teaching with imagination, movement, sound, and artistic creativity, children become deeply involved in the material at hand. This head/heart/hand approach becomes a deep, stimulating process with far reaching results for a child's balanced development - physical, emotional and intellectual.

DO THE SCIENCES HAVE ANY PLACE IN WALDORF SCHOOLS?

In Waldorf schools the sciences enjoy the same status as all other subjects and the curriculum includes biology, physics, and chemistry. In lower classes, these subjects are woven into the story telling and hands-on learning experiences through which the children learn. In upper classes, sciences are taught as blocks by a subject-specific teacher. The students continue writing and illustrations their own science workbooks, combining hands-on learning with written and oral subject mastery.

HOW DO WALDORF SCHOOLS FEEL ABOUT COMPUTERS?

Information Technology is a firmly established part of Waldorf education, but teachers prefer children to be well acquainted with the natural world - as well as having developed good social and creative skills there - before exploring the virtual one!

The importance of human example and interaction in education is considered paramount in Waldorf schools, and in this respect Waldorf primary schools do not employ computers as learning tools. There is little evidence that learning on a computer before the age of twelve gives a child any advantage, on the contrary there is more evidence that excessive exposure to computers, TV, and video games actually damage the younger child's natural development, whether it be in the area of brain development, social skills, moral responsibility, or emotional maturity.

In secondary school the children work with both hard and software as a matter of course and many Waldorf students go on to become computer experts professionally, having worked with computers exclusively in secondary school.

ARE WALDORF SCHOOLS RELIGIOUS?

Classes in religious doctrine are not part of the Waldorf curriculum and children of all religious backgrounds attend Waldorf schools. Waldorf education does not subscribe to the beliefs of any particular religion; however they tend to be spiritually oriented and are based out of a generally Christian perspective. The multicultural make-up of the Nairobi Waldorf School Trust demands that while the historic festivals of Christianity are observed in the classrooms and in school assemblies, the festivals of all other major religions are given equal recognition throughout the year.

Children have lessons in comparative religion and are generally left to make such choices later in life. Most importantly, Waldorf schools encourage reverence and respect for all life while actively celebrating the wonder of creation. Rudolf Steiner's personal spiritual insights are never taught in Waldorf schools.

WHAT IS THE WALDORF POLICY ON SPORTS AND HOW DOES THAT IMPACT A CHILD'S ABILITY TO COPE IN A COMPETITIVE WORLD?

In the lower classes the children are lead in didactic circle games appropriate and contributory to their stage of development. Competition is encouraged between teams rather than individuals. Later, equal emphasis is placed on the attainment of personal goals. In the upper classes, inter-school matches are arranged in various sports, such as football, swimming, and hockey.

The self-assurance gained through a school experience imbued with personal interactions, hands-on learning, artistic expression, and personal achievement, imparts the child with a strong basis and sense of self to deal confidently with the competitive environment of the workplace.

HOW DO WALDORF CHILDREN FARE WHEN THEY TRANSFER SCHOOLS?

The Waldorf Curriculum is especially designed to fulfill the needs of the child at each stage of their development and covers all the subjects prescribed by national curricula, with the significant difference that these subjects are addressed at varying ages and with a different approach and methodology. There are therefore more ideal moments than others for the children to change schools if necessary.

"When James joined Hillcrest, he was excited by the adventure. It was as though Waldorf education had opened his mind to learning. As a self-conscious child, Waldorf gave him confidence and the ability to make friends. He has won academic prizes, been house captain, and played on most sports teams. He has moved school three times since then, and even now in New Zealand he is reaping the benefits of his earlier years at the Nairobi Waldorf School Trust."

-Ingrid Dugand (Former NWST Parent)

Waldorf schools have been established in a great many countries worldwide. Where there are no secondary schools, Waldorf students easily readjust to other systems, often surprising teachers with their enthusiasm and creativity.

"Although the two systems of education are quite different, Makena's inner strength and confidence that she had developed at Waldorf and at home enabled her to go through the transition to Hillcrest with ease. At first the school was a bit suspicious because she did not know how to read or write. But the motor skills she developed at Nairobi Waldorf enabled her to learn fast, and she took off like an aircraft. She has caught up and even surpassed the others in her year."

-Bedan and Jane Mbugua (Former NWST Parents)

Transitions in the lower school, particularly between the classes one and four can potentially be more of a problem, because of the difference in the pacing of the curriculum. A class two pupil from a traditional school will be further ahead in reading in comparison with a Waldorf schooled class two pupil; however, the Waldorf schooled child will likely be ahead in arithmetic. The following reports bear testimony to the effectiveness of Waldorf education methods even when transfers of younger children are involved.

"When we arrived in the US, Miles entered second grade four weeks late. His reading skills were tested immediately and indicated that he was at the grade of an early first grade. His teachers were worried, we weren't, and we worked hard to get Miles to grade level. After a few months he was already at the same level as his peers. He was taking off with the speed of a rocket. The letter and phonic skills he had developed at Waldorf paid off now. 'Miles soaks information like a sponge' a teacher wrote in his report card. He became the shining student of the second grade. He is an outstanding student in music and art and his creative writing skills are top notch, in which he consistently receives top grades and has his teacher raving about him constantly. We believe Miles arrived into a very different educational setting with an extraordinary foundation, academically, artistically, socially, and personally, which he developed during his years at the Nairobi Waldorf School Trust."

-Peter and Charlotte Blessing (Former NWST Parents)

DOES WALDORF EDUCATION ADEQUATELY PREPARE STUDENTS FOR UNIVERSITY?

Results show that the marks attained by Waldorf students in internationally recognized qualifications, e.g. GCSE, A Level, Abitur, Matrix and IB, are considerably higher than national averages.

In 2006, typical performances came from two UK Waldorf schools, Michael Hall and Brighton Steiner School, who achieved 89% and 87% A-C grade passes respectively at GCSE, against a national average of 62.4%. Brighton recorded 42% A to A* grades and Michael Hall 32% against the average 19.1%. Michael Hall also exceeded the national average in A Level results with 83% of grade C and above, with 30% graded A versus the national average of 24.1%

Testimonials from college professors internationally attest to the intellectual prowess and consistent love of learning evident in Waldorf graduates at University level, where the whole spectrum of subjects are chosen and excelled in.

"Waldorf education addresses the child as no other education does. Learning, whether chemistry, mathematics, history or geography, is imbued with life and so with joy, which is the only true basis for later study. By the time they reach college and university, these students are grounded broadly and deeply and have a remarkable enthusiasm for learning."

-Dr. Arthur Zanjonc, Associate Professor of Physics, Amherst College