

# ABOUT US

## Frequently asked Questions

### 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. The Waldorf School Movement is a worldwide movement.

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. In substance and structure, all Waldorf schools are connected to the Waldorf Curriculum. At the same time, however, each Waldorf school is an autonomous entity, governed by specific characteristics.

Each country's Waldorf schools are grouped under the umbrella of a Federation and a Federation Council. In turn, these two bodies are accountable to the World Federation of Waldorf Schools. Waldorf Education is age specific, but does not stress mental age. The educational process is based on the developmental phases as they occur in the physical, emotional and spiritual/mental growth of the child. Thus, Waldorf Education is a matter of balance in capacities and values. The concentration on, and furtherance of special talents of a pupil begins only in the high school years.

### 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 childhoods 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 age-appropriate fashion.

### 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 Rudolf Steiner to establish and lead a school for the children of the factory's employees.

Rudolf Steiner agreed to do so on four conditions: The school should be open to all children; it should be co-educational; it should be a unified twelve-year school; and that 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 in September 1919.

### How many Waldorf Schools are there?

There are 17 Waldorf schools in South Africa, and in total, more than 1 000 Waldorf schools in over 32 countries, serving approximately 120 000 learners.

### 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.

## What is the philosophy behind Waldorf Education?

Consistent with his philosophy, called anthroposophy, Rudolf Steiner designed a curriculum responsive to the developmental phases in childhood and nurturing of children's imaginations. He believed 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.

## What is unique about Waldorf Education? How does it differ from other alternatives (public school, Montessori, Home-schooling)?

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 academic 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 learners, doing away with the need for competitive testing and grading.

Some distinctive features of Waldorf Education include the following:

- Academics are de-emphasised in the early years of schooling. There is no academic content in the Waldorf Nursery School experience (although there is a good deal of cultivation of pre-academic skills), and minimal academics in first grade. Reading is not forced until second or third grade, although the letters are introduced carefully in the first year.
- During the primary school years (grades 1-7) the learners have a class (or "main lesson") teacher who stays with the same class for (ideally) the entire seven years of primary school.
- Certain activities which are often considered "frills" at mainstream schools are central at Waldorf schools, such as art, music, gardening and crafts, to name a few. In the younger grades, all subjects are introduced through artistic media, because the children respond better to this medium than to dry lecturing and rote learning. All children learn to play recorder and to knit (knitting is the best tool to integrate left and right brain).
- There are no "text books" as such in the first five years. All children have "main lesson books", which are their own workbooks which they create during the course of the year. They essentially produce their own "text books" which record their experiences and what they have learned. Upper grades use textbooks to supplement their main lesson work.
- Learning in a Waldorf school is a non-competitive activity. There are no grades given at primary school level; the teacher writes a detailed evaluation of the child at the end of each school year, after a year of continuous assessment.
- The use of electronic media, particularly television, by young children is strongly discouraged in Waldorf schools. It has been found that children perform with greater creativity if they are trained in basic skills before they are exposed to the computer screen during their high school years.

## What does a typical Waldorf curriculum contain?

The Waldorf curriculum is designed to be responsive to the various phases of a child's development. The relationship between learner and teacher is, likewise, recognised 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 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.

## Why do Waldorf learners stay with the same teacher for 7 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 the home and family. The class becomes a type of "family" as well, with its own authority figure – the teacher – in a role analogous to the parent.

With this approach, the learners 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 knowing that this approach was the norm in the days of the "little red schoolhouse".

## How is personality conflicts handled between learner and teacher?

This is a very common concern among parents when they first hear about the “Class Teacher” method. However, in practice, the situation very rarely arises, especially so when the teacher has been able to establish a relationship with the class right from the first grade.

Given the type of person who is motivated to become a Waldorf teacher, incompatibility with a child is infrequent: understanding the child’s needs and temperament is central to the teacher’s role and training. If problems of this sort should occur, the faculty as a whole would work 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.

## How does Waldorf deal with children who struggle academically?

Waldorf schools struggle 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 more difficult problems of the same kind to work on, or might be asked to help a child who was having trouble.

## How is reading taught in a Waldorf school?

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 throughout 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 year, 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 are festivals and celebrations emphasised?

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 watching Television?

The reasons for this have as much to do with the physical effects of the medium on the developing child as with the often 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. Too much exposure to computer games hampers fantasy and tends to strengthen aggression and nervousness.

Waldorf teachers are not 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 a university degree and teaching certification from a recognised Waldorf teacher training college or institute. Some Waldorf training programmes can also grant BA-degrees in conjunction with Waldorf teaching certification.

Typically, the course of study for teachers is from two to three years of post-graduate training, and includes practice teaching in a Waldorf school under the supervision of experienced Waldorf teachers. Teachers must also satisfy whatever national or provincial credentialing and licensing requirements might apply.

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 humankind.”

## 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 from 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 in earlier years, while comparative religion gives the older learners a world view of man's spiritual endeavour.

## How do Waldorf children fare when they transfer to 'regular' schools?

Generally, transitions to public schools, when they are anticipated, are not problematic. The most common transition is from grade seven in a Waldorf school to a more traditional high school, and, from all reports, this 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 various curricula. 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, art and practical skills.

## How well do Waldorf graduates do on standard tests? How well do Waldorf high school graduates do at University?

To the best of our knowledge, no controlled studies have been done on these questions, but informal evidence collected from various sources would seem to suggest that Waldorf graduates tend to score towards the high end on standardised examinations such as the Scholastic Aptitude Tests. As far as higher education goes, Waldorf graduates have been accepted as learners at, and have graduated from, some of the most prestigious colleges and universities in South Africa and around the world.

## What is anthroposophy?

The term "anthroposophy" comes from the Greek "anthropos-sophia" or "human wisdom". Rudolf Steiner expanded an exacting scientific method by which one could do research for her/himself into 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.

Rudolf 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 works 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 South Africa, 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 learners.

## What is Eurythmy?

Most simply put, Eurythmy 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".

Eurythmy 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 bodies and their life forces. Later, the older learners work out elaborate eurythmic presentations of poetry, drama and music, thereby gaining a deeper perception of the compositions and writings.

Eurythmy enhances co-ordination 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, social strengthening also results.

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