

# Taking the Pulse of Waldorf Early Childhood Education

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In August of 2013 representatives of the Waldorf early childhood movement in North America gathered in Spring Valley, NY, to look at the early childhood work on this continent. The participants included regional representatives of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America (WECAN), teacher trainers, WECAN board members, and members of various WECAN task forces.

On the first day we focused on the children; then, on the second, our work with parents and colleagues; finally, on the third day, the work of WECAN and the movement as a whole. We parted with a renewed appreciation for the spiritual richness of the work with the young child, a fuller sense of the challenges to family life in these times, and ever bolder imaginations with which to meet the future of Waldorf early childhood education.

Although the accomplishments of the last decade remained in the background of our conversations, they are significant and include:

- A greater awareness among Waldorf parents and the culture as a whole of the particular needs of the young child and the importance of the first seven years as a foundation for later academic learning and social skills,
- The proliferation of programs for children younger than four years of age and the creation of parent/child programs to help new parents understand their young child's needs and to support the schools in introducing Waldorf education to prospective families,
- The recognition by early childhood educators of the need to understand, observe, assess, and learn how to work with the developmental challenges of young children

that appear to be the result of our modern lifestyles, and

- Increased professionalism of Waldorf early childhood educators and greater clarity about training needs and expectations for teachers and caregivers.

Home, family, and lifestyles changes have a big impact on our work, and many current challenges are related to these cultural changes.

- Changing definitions of the terms “family” and “home” require educators to meet diverse and individual pathways of incarnation with acceptance, empathy, and understanding.
- The task of Waldorf early childhood education has shifted from providing cultural enrichment to being a haven for the development of the foundational senses of touch, life, movement, and balance.
- There is an increasing need for early childhood educators to develop capacities for observation, without losing the whole child in the midst of measurable particulars, and to deepen the spiritual work in assessment rather than focusing only on the outer aspects.
- Increasingly, parents hunger for information and support, and we need to find new ways to partner with parents of young children.
- Parents of two-year-olds want to enroll their children, and, as a result, early childhood teachers are being asked to create programs for two-year-olds. Attempts to do so have made it clear that we need to better understand the particular needs of the child under three years of age and to create more home-like settings that can properly serve the child who still lives

within the sheath of the family and has not yet said “I.”

There are several new areas of research in early childhood being taken up by groups and individuals in the current year. These include:

- Providing resources for teachers of the very young child,
- Finding ways to support the movement and sensory development needs of children in kindergarten,
- Cultivating a deeper understanding and tools for the transition between kindergarten and first grade,
- Building healthy partnerships with parents, and
- Discovering bridges between mainstream research on child development and an anthroposophical understanding of pedagogical practices in early childhood.

Results of these projects and the work of individual classroom teachers will allow us to meet the current challenges with greater success.

No matter how the work changes or in what forms it will be found in the future, we want to reiterate that our essential purpose—which is to create life-filled environments where young children are free to develop in their own time and manner—will not be compromised, even as the world becomes increasingly complex and materialistic. Time, space, and simplicity are inscribed on the banner that we see flying above our work.

In sharing our stories, we are discovering that our work is more and more about relationships. Children today come to us with a greater sense of their individuality and a greater need to be acknowledged individually than used to be the case. Our work with parents and colleagues is becoming even more critical in providing the social atmosphere that is needed, not only for the children, but also for our own development and that of

our institutions. We can see a growing need for more collaboration within our faculties, communities, and institutions—studying together, sharing research, and supporting one another’s development of the capacity to sense and respond to what is being asked of us.

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