

## What is a Waldorf Doll?

Philipp Reubke

---

If someone is looking for a Waldorf doll, they can buy one in many larger Waldorf schools, in some toy stores, and of course on the internet. There are even manufacturers that have applied for “Waldorf doll” as a brand name. But are these commercially available dolls the real, original Waldorf doll?

The educational lectures of Rudolf Steiner often speak about the special qualities and needs of the young child, as well as the inner attitude and soul qualities that the adult needs to acquire to support the development of the child. However, if one is looking for a detailed description of how a Waldorf kindergarten looks and the concrete activities that should take place there, these are not to be found in the works of Rudolf Steiner. No program and no recipes!

There are however a few exceptions, a few details that Steiner describes quite concretely. And the doll is one of these. One can simply look up what the original Waldorf doll was to look like.

Already in Rudolf Steiner’s first publication on education in 1907 he wrote:

*You can make a doll for a child by folding up an old napkin, making two corners into legs, the other two corners into arms, a knot for the head, and painting eyes, nose and mouth with blots of ink.*<sup>1</sup>

And many years later (1923) he said something quite similar:

*„Give a child a handkerchief or a piece of cloth, knot it so that a head appears above and two legs below, and you have made a doll or a kind of clown. With a few ink stains you can give it eyes, nose, and mouth, or even better, allow the child to do it.“*<sup>2</sup>

And in one of his final educational lectures, again:

*„But if you make a doll out of a napkin or a handkerchief with two ink spots for eyes, a dab of ink for a mouth, and some sort of arms, then with imagination the child can add a great deal to it.“*<sup>3</sup>

This has nothing to do with the so-called Waldorf dolls that one can purchase today. Even more radical: there is no such thing as „the“ Waldorf doll! An old napkin will look different each time – it could be a handkerchief, as we have read and through the way it is described makes it clear that this kind of cloth and the spots of ink are not specified. If one wants to be a bit free, one can feel encouraged to explore other materials, for example, a piece of wood, a cork, or whatever one has on hand. For this reason, the Waldorf doll will look completely different each time, and can adapt to the life circumstances of each kindergarten, the capacities of the educator, the desires and fantasy of the children, the culture and the socio-economic conditions. It is flexible, accommodating, and multi-cultural – very modern!

However, the Waldorf doll has some serious disadvantages for our current taste: it can’t be bought, one can’t make money with it, it is modest looking and not always beautiful, one must make it oneself, it is never simply available, and may look more like a little radish than a Barbie doll; it appears and disappears again quickly.

---

<sup>1</sup> Steiner, Rudolf. The Education of the Child in the Light of Spiritual Science” GA 34

<sup>2</sup> Steiner, Rudolf. The Child’s Changing Consciousness. Dornach, 18 April 1923, GA 306

<sup>3</sup> Steiner, Rudolf. The Kingdom of Childhood, Torquay, 13 August 1924, GA 311

It is astonishing, that the disadvantages seem to outweigh the advantages for many Waldorf kindergartens and child care centers, where one does not necessarily find many real Waldorf dolls. Do we find them too modest looking? Do we think that children will be bored by them? Or is it too hard to do such simple handwork ourselves? We could actually practice with the Waldorf doll, because, as it is described by Rudolf Steiner, it is the least challenging handwork activity imaginable.

In order to offer encouragement to allow the worldwide population of Waldorf dolls to grow, we offer here again a summary of arguments by Rudolf Steiner why these ephemeral but extremely lively play companions are so important for the development of the child. And we also add here some comments from contemporaries, whose tone reminds us of what Rudolf Steiner said 100 years ago.

### **Outer Simplicity, Inner Strength**

*„If the child has before him the folded napkin, he has to fill in from his own imagination all that is needed to make it real and human. This work of the imagination molds and builds the forms of the brain.“<sup>4</sup>*

### **Activity fosters strength**

*„As the muscles of the hand grow firm and strong in performing the work for which they are fitted, so the brain and other organs of the physical body of man are guided into the right lines of development if they receive the right impression from their environment...Give the child the so-called ‘pretty’ doll, and the brain has nothing more to do. Instead of unfolding, it becomes stunted and dried up.“<sup>5</sup>*

### **Strengthening Fantasy**

*„...such beautifully formed faces, wonderfully painted cheeks, ... this kills the fantasy of the child, for it leaves nothing to the imagination.“ But with the simple doll, then with imagination, the child can add a great deal to it.“<sup>6</sup>*

### **Development of Sensitivity and Subtlety of Feeling**

*With the so-called beautiful doll, we hinder the child from developing the unfolding of a wonderfully delicate, awakening fantasy.<sup>7</sup>*

In summary: with the simple cloth doll, the essential is not in the outer world; it appears in the child's fantasy and powers of imagination. It is not finished; it arises through activity. The outer world does not impose itself on the child, and a delicate fantasy can freely develop. Outer simplicity, inner diversity and dynamics – this connection is often mentioned in educational discussions in the last 20 years. Freya Pausewang wrote in an article that appeared in 2011:

*“Found objects lead us away from consumerism and dependence on specially prepared material, as well as from money. The material stimulates the child to improvise, develop ideas further, accept challenges, and master new situations. The child plays with greater self-determination.“<sup>8</sup>*

For this reason, a number of kindergartens in Germany have initiated „toy free“ times:

---

<sup>4</sup> Steiner, Rudolf. The Education of the Child. Op cit.

<sup>5</sup> ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Steiner, Rudolf. The Kingdom of Childhood. Op cit.

<sup>7</sup> Steiner, Rudolf. Child's Changing Consciousness. Op cit.

<sup>8</sup> Freya Pausewang. Zeug zum Spielen - Hilfreich für zukunftsnotwendiges Lernen? In: Das Kita Handbuch, herausgegeben von Martin Textor, <http://www.kindergartenpaedagogik.de/2224.html>

*„Little children are so overloaded with toys and other consumer products that this can lead to an inability in later youth and adulthood to know what to do with themselves. Because of this assumption the “toy-free kindergarten project” arose. Children should learn with the help of the project, to “come to themselves” and become acquainted with their own needs.”<sup>9</sup>*

And the text of a website for parents in the USA reminds us of Steiner’s old napkin:  
*“It is important to note that some of the best open-ended toys are recycled items from your home...”<sup>10</sup>*

The author Colleen D. Multari distinguishes between toys that are close-ended and determine the course and the outcome of play, and toys that are open-ended and leave the child free to independently shape the course of play. The open-ended toys foster creativity and the capacity for problem-solving.<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, a quote from the French psychologist Régine Démarthes: „It is the manner in which a child acts with a toy, that makes it complex and alive in the child’s eyes. But when the toy imposes its complexity on the child, it cripples the child’s creative fantasy.”<sup>12</sup>

---

*Philipp Reubke is a Waldorf kindergarten teacher in Mulhouse, France, and member of the IASWECE Coordinating Group*

---

<sup>9</sup> Claudia Bihl. Spielzeugfreie Zeit in Kindergärten. <https://www.betreut.de/magazin/kinder/spielzeugfreie-zeit-in-kindergaerten-347/>

<sup>10</sup> Colleen D. Multari. The Benefits of Open-Ended Toys for Kids. <http://www.nymetroparents.com/article/Why-Simple-Toys-Prove-to-Be-More-Beneficial-For-Kids>

<sup>11</sup> “Closed-ended, toy-directed play does not allow for creative exploration or imaginative play, and it also limits a child’s ability to problem-solve. Surprisingly, simple toys offer more play opportunities to children than complex toys. Simple toys with multiple uses allow children to be in charge of the resulting play. Open-ended toys result in open-ended play. This type of play can evolve over time while also encouraging children to create and problem-solve as they explore the world around them.”

<sup>12</sup> Régine Démarthes. Quand un enfant s’ennuie. In : « enfances et psy » N° 15, septembre 2001, éd érès. <http://www.cairn.info/revue-enfances-et-psy-2001-3.htm> « C'est la façon dont l'enfant investit le jouet qui le complexifie et le rends vivant à ses yeux. Quand le jouet impose sa complexité, il muselle les capacités créatives de l'enfant. »