

Waldorf Grade One Readiness Assessment

The Grade One Readiness Assessment is used to determine whether a child has reached developmental milestones, can accomplish the major associated tasks, and is ready for the expectations of a grade one class. A child may already know the ABC's or be able to count to 100, but a child also needs to be ready physically, socially, and emotionally, as well as be able to exhibit behaviour that will support school success. The Waldorf Kindergarten teacher will be doing the Grade One Readiness Assessments for all children who are going through the registration application process for grade one. They are done in a playful, imaginative way and are intended to observe where the children are developmentally.

Developmentally appropriate education is at the core of the Waldorf education pedagogy and integral to the success of your child in the program. The following article may help to give more insight into the process and why it is important.

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Help Your Child by Getting the Timing Right

Alicia Benoit-Clark

The old expression goes: 'You're never too old to learn.' But maybe there's such a thing as being too young... Many child development experts now are saying that too much, too early, does not give your child a head start, and that being on the fast track may even do harm... Learning for children comes naturally, and when children are ready to learn, you can't stop them. But it has again to do with that word 'readiness', and readiness is an individual matter.

There are signs you can look for to know if a child is ready for first grade. In the physical realm, the first grade child's limbs are now in proportion with the body and head. There is a loss of baby fat and greater definition in the face. In the emotional realm the young child who once expressed strong emotions through sudden outbursts now has feelings that begin to deepen. A child will talk of "hurt feelings" and being sad. Socially, the first grade ready child begins to form friendships that go deeper than before. The child feels loyalty for friends and often expresses the desire to be with them.

In the mental realm, there is the birth of free memory. This is different than the memory of a four year old. The younger child's memory must be triggered by a sight, smell, or rhythmic verse. When the memory is freed around age six or seven the child can find the memory and recall at will.

Along with memory, children begin to develop a capacity to understand symbolic concepts. Richard Cohen studies how children learn at a special research kindergarten run by UCLA's School of Education: "Kids learn through their experiences. They're not able to sit back and think symbolically, the way we like to think most of us are able to do. So most children under the age of 6 or 7 learn best by handling and manipulating

real objects, and experiencing real things. They need to explore their world for a long time before they can begin to attach symbols or concepts to things."

Another mental change is in the realm of imagination, which is different than fantasy. Fantasy play requires props. Imagination is born when a child does not need physical objects to see the play in their minds. They are happy just to sit and play with visions in their heads. First grade ready children become interested in language arts and mathematics. They love to play with words, make rhymes or change words in songs and verses.

Joan Almon, in her article, *Education for Creative Thinking: The Waldorf Approach*, relates a story from the childhood of the well-known Viennese kindergarten teacher Bronja Zahlingen:

As a child, she loved to play with small objects on a deep window seat in her bedroom. She would create a scene with little dolls and houses and play with them for long periods of time. She remembers that one day, when she was about six years old, she set up a scene as usual but then closed her eyes and played 'inside'. Imagination had been born, and she was able to participate in her play in a new way.

Almon uses this story to point up the essential reason why the academic subjects must wait for the development of this inner imagination, and why imagination should be a central pillar of the first grade curriculum:

The development of imagination is an essential step in thinking, but where the development of fantasy has been curtailed, the development of imagination also suffers. Without imagination, one cannot picture an event in history, a verbal problem in mathematics, or the characters of a book. To approach academic subjects without imagination is a dull affair at best, and it is not surprising that children who are being educated without benefit of imagination at the elementary level find learning so uninteresting. Their newborn imagination is not being fed and nourished. Those who have been asked to master academics at the kindergarten level may suffer an even deeper problem, for in them imagination may be aborted before being born. There are indications that children who learn to read before age six or seven lose their early advantages, for they lose interest in reading and may eventually suffer burnout. This is not surprising when one thinks of how dull reading and learning are without the benefit of imagination to bring them alive. In contrast, in my experience, the children who are the best players in the kindergarten and have the most active fantasy tend to become the most imaginative elementary pupils with the greatest interest in reading. They also tend to be the best adjusted emotionally, both as children and even as adolescents and adults.

As the first grade ready child leaves the world of fantasy and enters the world of imagination, she or he also leaves the world of imitation and enters the world of

authority. The child looks to the adult for direction and as one who "knows." David Elkind, a psychologist and president of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, points out some of the implications of this belief in adult authority:

I think we don't appreciate it fully, but when we ask a child to, say, perform in reading or math and he's not prepared to do that, he blames himself. He thinks, here's an adult, adults know everything, they understand everything, if they're telling me to do this, then I should be able to do it, and if I'm not able to do it, there's something wrong with me. So they blame themselves, and if we expose them to inappropriate learning experiences at that age, then they blame themselves for not learning, and that inhibits the whole learning process and their self-esteem and so on. So it's a very critical period for learning attitudes about oneself, about school, and about learning. And if we don't give children opportunities to really succeed, to feel good about themselves in the learning environment, then one risk is long-term problems with learning, schooling, and self-esteem.

One can also sometimes look to children's drawings to find a developmental readiness for first grade; drawings of people with reasonably realistic proportions, complete and upright houses, and symmetrical drawings all tend to indicate the degree of maturity needed for first grade.

Joan Almon, in the Waldorf Kindergarten Association's booklet, *First Grade Readiness and Related Issues*, concludes:

When all these changes are thoughtfully considered, one usually feels strongly that a child is either ready for first grade or needs to wait another year. Sometimes, however, the situation is less clear and in such cases my rule of thumb has been that if I am not certain, it is better to let the child wait, simply because when a child is ready it is so evident. Occasionally, though, one also needs to consider the relationship of the child to his classmates who are going on to first grade, or the relationship of the child to the first grade teacher. There can be the rare exception where the child is not quite ready to go on but life circumstances dictate that it is best for the child to move forward.

In countries such as Scandinavia, which use age seven as the normal age for first grade, readiness is not a major issue... Where age six is used, however, the likelihood of unreadiness is so great, and the price paid by the child so enormous, that one needs to be well versed about first grade readiness in order to make the best decision for the child... In the final analysis, it is in knowing the child at the deepest levels that guides parents and teachers towards the right decision for that child. One hopes the child's angel is whispering in our ear and that we are listening carefully.

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