

Home Education and Steiner

A popular alternative to conventional schooling is the **Steiner or Waldorf** (both names are used for the same) school system and many of the ideas implemented in such schools can be very effectively translated into the home education setting.

This leaflet can only give a tiny taste of what ideas Steiner education has to offer the home educating family – reading more about the method or visiting a Steiner school will no doubt inspire you with further ideas and enthusiasm. Steiner education is a very holistic, child-centred approach which focuses on all aspects of a child's development. Some concepts may be familiar in that they are incorporated into conventional early childhood education practice.

Relationships

Steiner schools recognise the crucial importance of the parent-child relationship, with parental involvement usually at a high level. During the early years up to about 7 years old, a child will seldom attend a Steiner school full-time, instead having a more gradual introduction from home into school; then from 7 –14 a child will have one main teacher to ensure an intimate relationship, which helps to enhance the teacher's role in educational and pastoral care, whilst other teachers become involved in subjects such as music, crafts, languages and physical games to broaden the child's experience of caring adults. This closely resembles a home educating parent and child who attend various activities and clubs outside the home with other adults and children, increasingly as the child gets older.

There are usually significantly smaller classes than conventional schools, recognition of the value of human scale relationships, which of course is paramount in home education. There is great importance attached to the teacher as a role model to be imitated and respected, just as a parent can work hard at self-awareness and personal development so as to be truly worth emulating. Particularly at the younger ages, Steiner education recognises how much children learn by modelling and imitating the behaviour of adults around them. It is important to be aware this may differ in the Steiner school environment compared to the

home education setting, since people working in schools will have studied Anthroposophy (Steiner's spiritual world-view). As role-models, therefore, they will always be guided by certain specific principles, working from the anthroposophical spiritual perspective of child development, which a home educating parent may or may not choose to adopt.

Temperament and Individuality

An interesting aspect of Steiner's philosophy is that of assessing a child's individual personality and character in relation to the temperament profiles - choleric, melancholic, sanguine and phlegmatic. A child will have elements of all these temperaments, but one will predominate. The ultimate aim is that in maturity there will be profound awareness of one's strengths and weaknesses, resulting in a more balanced approach to life. One might respond differently to each child according to his or her temperament, with more understanding of certain negative characteristics, which the child can learn to control and channel, and more appreciation of positive aspects, which can be developed and celebrated.

This idea of categorising a child can be seen as stereotyping or labelling, but used with care it can reveal some insight into the different personalities of children (and there can be great variety within families). Any personality type system, even Zodiac signs for example, can be helpful if used with intelligence and insight, towards self-development and awareness of self and others, with appreciation of each child's individuality.

Steiner education, like home education, does have a very strong emphasis on nourishing each child's individuality, which awareness of individual temperament can enhance. In home education there is even more possibility for responding to a child's individual needs, resulting in real flexibility in teaching and learning styles. Similarly, as a child is not graded in Steiner education but given individual reports of achievement and interests, a home educated child can have the benefit of this ongoing 'portfolio' type of assessment.

Timetable and Curriculum

Steiner schools have an unusual timetable compared to conventional schools, which closely reflects the way home educating families can operate. They will pursue one particular topic area, e.g. an aspect of history, English, Geography or whatever, for a full 2 – 3 hours each morning in their Main lesson, in which they will explore the area in a very cross-curricular way, incorporating music, drama, poetry and stories, art etc. into the subject. This subject is pursued each morning for a period of 2 – 4 weeks, facilitating total immersion and absorption in the subject. All learning is recorded in artistic and beautiful 'Main Lesson' books, like project folders.

Children have the more 'intellectual', 'academic' work in the morning when they are most fresh and able to learn, followed by activities which require regular practice and repetition (English, maths, music, languages, eurhythmy) before lunch, and will have more creative, relaxing activities such as craft and leisure activities in the afternoon – in a home education setting, this kind of structure is highly compatible, with the additional possibility of 'field trips' some afternoons.

This routine allows the material learned in the morning time to settle and be assimilated in the mind overnight (a good night's sleep being important for effective learning), so that the next day the material may be briefly revised before moving on. The method emphasises the importance of regular revision, practice and repetition of previous learning alongside further learning. This way of learning can cover as much as a conventional timetable but with the benefit of concentration on a topic in depth and incorporating the subject's relevance and connectedness to other subjects – it is a very holistic curriculum structure which in part removes the artificial barrier of arbitrary subject divisions. In the home environment with only one or a few children learning, it is possible to be even more flexible so that one can follow individual interests, and if one subject inspires interest in another, diversions can be easily followed up and incorporated. Steiner also has a general curriculum which assumes that all children have an interest in particular aspects of the world at certain stages, which maybe interesting for inspiration and guidance.

Rhythm

The structure or rhythm of the day/week/year is also important and well thought out, ensuring regular daily, weekly, seasonal and annual activities or routines (e.g. multi-cultural festival celebrations), giving the security of consistent, familiar patterns of living. This is reinforced by appropriate songs, stories and craft activities. There is also attention paid to providing a rhythmic balance of active and restful activities, like breathing in and breathing out. In a home education setting, a similar awareness of rhythmic balance and routine may be helpful, allowing for spontaneity and flexibility along with a reassuring overall rhythm of life.

Heart, Body and Mind

Steiner's view of children was highly spiritual and holistic; he gave consideration to all aspects of the child's being: heart, body and mind, all equally important in the learning process. The three faculties of 'willing' (the impulse to do, to be active), 'feeling' (the imaginative, emotional life) and 'thinking' (the rational, analytical thinking skills) are considered developmentally more significant in different phases of life, willing up to about 7, feeling to about 14 and thinking after 14.

Translated into home education therefore, a parent would emphasise these aspects at the various stages. The years before 7 would concentrate on physical, active, creative and imitative pursuits such as painting, baking, craft, singing, dancing, stories, and spontaneous 'play' (rather than structured 'work') preferably with natural or hand-crafted materials – e.g. the activities that a child will often do in a nursery/early childhood setting with a similar approach to 'play being the child's work' and 'learning through play', but allowed to continue through to about age 7.

After 7 the more structured work would begin in the form of Main lessons as detailed above, with a strong focus on appealing particularly to the imaginative, emotional life of the child as a way of inspiring interest in the subject, as well as the active participatory learning methods used in the previous years. After age 14 these concepts do not become invalid, they are simply supplemented with the more rational exercise of the intellect, as the child becomes able to deal with concepts in this way.

Each subject or concept therefore is introduced as far as possible in a way which engages the imaginative, emotional aspects of a child as well

as in a physical way, as experientially as possible. For example a child may listen to stories, sing and dance to songs in foreign languages, living the language rather than consciously learning the vocabulary and grammar - this is after all how a child learns a native language.

Letters of the alphabet may be taught through stories, pictures and body movements - a story about a tall tree trying not to topple, then the child creating a picture representing a tree which somehow suggests the shape of a 't' or 'T' - rather like the Letterland series, although from the child's own imagination. This could be supplemented by such activities as stretching arms out into a T shape, standing or lying on the ground in that shape, forming that shape with one's body or with a friend, drawing a 't' in the air, big and small, or walking a 't' shape across the floor. This process could be applied to almost any concept or skill; it is a combination of emotional, imaginative, artistic and physical, motor-sensory learning.

The relationship between mind and body is also reflected in Eurhythmy, a form of movement combined with music, sound, voice and poetry – many physical movements improve thinking skills and brain functioning, for example the importance of finger play for the very young child's development. (Another way of facilitating this physical/mental agility, for adults and children and particularly effective for those with learning difficulties, is Brain Gym or Educational Kinesiology, read [Brain Gym](#) – Paul Dennison).

Two aspects present in Steiner schools which are more difficult to reproduce at home are: the whole classroom and school 'dynamic', the interaction of a group of children and adults with different temperaments, gifts and qualities, learning together in a small community; and the theatrical element of a Steiner teacher 'performing' in the classroom, inviting and enticing the children to engage with the learning with hearts and minds. Arranging regular group learning situations with other families can allow such aspects to be partly introduced into home-education.

Readiness for learning

The whole process emphasises the importance of readiness for learning – one thing often highly contested is that Steiner generally does not begin more academic concepts, such as reading and writing, until 7, on the basis that the child is investing so much energy forming the

physical body and incarnating the ego until then, it is not appropriate to divert that energy into rigorous academic work. The focus is more on the gradual emergence of the whole person as a spiritual and physical being.

Since this is perhaps the most controversial aspect of Steiner education, some different views may be appropriate. Many parents may find that their child is eager to learn to read and write earlier. One view might suggest that if the child's interest is genuinely coming from within and from stimulation through available external resources and materials, rather than from parental or other pressure, then the child might benefit from being allowed to pursue such interests at an individual pace; another view may propose that since children have a natural aptitude for language before age 6 this should be used to advantage; another view might say that provided the environment is rich in storytelling and verbal language experience, then the world has plenty to offer the under-7 year old without adding reading and writing. Careful, unbiased observation of each individual child's development, interests, skills and abilities should help each parent feel confident whichever way is chosen.

Storytelling

Storytelling, as mentioned, is a central aspect of Steiner education, since stories appeal directly to the child's emotional and imaginative aspects. It is possible to introduce all **concepts** this way with some ingenuity – a basic example is 'Danny Divide' sharing out number of apples or cutting up his birthday cake to share with his friends. The story will include as much incidental, realistic detail as possible, so the concept does not get in the way of the story!

These stories are created (not necessarily on the spot) by the teacher and told from memory or spontaneously, so as not to create a physical barrier between storyteller and audience, and so as not to interfere with two-way relationship and interaction in storytelling. Stories such as fairy tales, fables and myths are learned by heart and retold from memory, and repeated often.

Furthermore, stories are used to deal with day-to-day and deeper moral and emotional issues regarding a child – with subtlety so that the child hardly consciously recognises that allusion is being made to his or her circumstances. On a deeper level of consciousness the child will respond to the metaphor and learn whatever is

contained within the story. The story will not paint a black and white picture, i.e. this is good, this is bad, this is right, this is wrong – it will simply demonstrate by the actions of the characters and their internal feelings, and the consequences of those actions, allowing the child to create a personal response (hopefully a positive one!) to the metaphor. This is a more sophisticated version of bibliotheca. Two books about this kind of therapeutic storytelling (not directly related to Steiner education) are Annie Stories – a special kind of storytelling – Doris Brett, a basic introduction which contains ideas for creating stories and some ready made scripts for using or adapting, although these lack subtlety, or Therapeutic Metaphors for Children and the Child Within – Mills and Crowley, a much more complex but excellent book about creating sophisticated and subtle metaphors to help children.

Wider Implications of Steiner Education

Steiner education is highly in tune with the global, environmental issues of today. Creativity is really at the heart of Steiner; we can celebrate the emphasis on imaginative, freethinking, divergent ideas, inspiring minds that can help provide solutions to the global issues and immense challenges the world has to face in this century. Music, dance, drama, making and building things, growing things, a close relationship with Nature, community festivals, celebrations, multi-cultural awareness and involvement – all this is very compatible with promoting effective environmental awareness, understanding concepts such as self-sufficiency and a sustainable future, multi-cultural tolerance and celebration of differences. Steiner education also challenges the materialistic 'consumer' society we have, since Lego and Barbie dolls are out, in favour of natural materials and self-produced toys and goods, which are cheaper and do not waste the earth's valuable resources, as well as encouraging imagination and creativity, and nurturing humankind's ability to transform things. An excellent book with this emphasis is Green Parenting (Juliet Solomon).

Your Family and Steiner Education

Do not think that following the Steiner approach has to be exclusive of all other approaches – it may be that you find certain aspects of Steiner education very appealing and highly compatible with the way you would like to teach and learn at home, or it may be that there are just some aspects which you could take on and benefit from. It may be that a combination of various approaches, an eclectic mix of for example, Steiner, Montessori, A.S. Neill, John Holt and YOU is the absolute ideal for your family. (To investigate other ideas more fully, see leaflets "Choosing Your Approach" and "Further Reading" in the EO Information Leaflet Series.) If you would like to learn more about Steiner, you might wish to approach a local Steiner School or the Steiner Schools Fellowship for brochures or leaflets. Why not also tell them all about home education and suggest the possibility of flexi-schooling? They may welcome fee-paying part-timers or the skills you may be able to offer!

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