

Entering a Steiner Education: The Kindergarten Child

Rudolf Steiner emphasised three important aspects to consider in the education of a child. He spoke of the importance between **head, heart and hands** that is; **thinking** (the brain/cognition); **feeling** (heart and emotions), and **willing or doing** (the limbs and activity). When these three aspects are fully developed and working harmoniously with each other, we are healthy and 'well balanced.' Every aspect of our education seeks to develop the proper relationship between these three faculties. In this way we seek to provide a truly holistic education.

Thinking, feeling and willing do not develop together but in an unfolding series of cycles. The child's thinking is very different in each phase, which means that the style of learning is radically different, depending on the age of the child. In the first seven years the child is developing their physical body so is learning through physical actions- *willing*. In the second cycle from 7-14 years the period is one of strong *feeling*-and the teaching method is one of engaging their imagination and their emotions pictorially. The third cycle, 14-21, the focus shifts to an emphasis on the intellectual development- *thinking*. Adolescents want to understand the truth of the world, to analyze, argue, philosophize and hypothesize. The seven-year periods are of course not clear-cut, and each child experiences them at a slightly different rate. But taken as a whole, the **class** will normally be experiencing these common changes.

At the end of Kindergarten, the child is completing the first 7-year phase of development. We know that in Kindergarten the child looks to the teacher to imitate all that she or he is doing. The young child is a being of imitation from the moment of birth. This innate capacity for imitation is the source of all early learning. This is the basis of our Kindergarten curriculum; providing experiences and activities worthy of imitation. Children of this age assume that the world is good and set out to copy it. Children do not just copy the outer action- they absorb the whole context including whether an activity is intrinsically purposeful or not. Young children are intrinsically trusting and totally open to the world around them. You could think of the child before seven as one whole sense organ as the child totally absorbs all sensory perceptions. Kindergarten teachers work from this understanding and care is taken that the senses are nurtured and allowed to develop healthily. The Kindergarten days are filled with free play, story, circle time and daily chores. The child's work is their play. They learn the complexity of social interaction through play. And, the children watch and imitate the teacher.

Also, in Kindergarten you will see the development of strong daily, weekly and seasonal rhythms. Children thrive physically and emotionally in the security of these rhythms and this understanding is carried out throughout the Class Teacher years. We are not rigid in our rhythms, we can be flexible and more so with older children however, rhythm is a basic building block of our work and something we value and strive for.

Something else is going on too during this first seven-year stage. Steiner talks of the life force of the child (which he refers to as the etheric force), which is like an inward artist that works to build up a physical body that the child can use. When the child enters Class 1 the life force or the etheric body, which has been busy body building for the first seven years of the child's life will have completed the majority of its work with the physical body. In the seventh year we see the change of teeth and the head and body size begins to change as the limbs grow and there can be the beginning of the loss of 'baby fat'. Now that this life force is somewhat freed from

working on the physical body it is now ready to be used to develop the cognitive or thinking realm of the child.