

# Meeting the Needs of the Times

Cynthia K. Aldinger

*This article is excerpted from the forthcoming publication What Is a Waldorf Kindergarten? (available September 2007 from SteinerBooks). It offers a brief overview of the expansion of the Waldorf/Steiner early childhood movement in North America from being primarily a kindergarten movement to the inclusion of parent-child programs, extended day programs and childcare. It introduces the work of LifeWays North America as representing one model of care that has developed from the Waldorf/Steiner early childhood movement.*

Rudolf Steiner believed that one of the essential aspects of education was to teach in such a way that the children would learn how to properly breathe. In early childhood we might say “to live in such a way that the children will learn how to breathe.”

As a young child in the 1950s, when my mother worked part-time I was always with my grandparents. On days my mother did not work, I was home all day for several days in a row. Occasionally, mother would go to a neighbor’s home for coffee and a chat, and I would go with her and play with the children of that household. Whether I was at grandma’s house or at home, I was playing by myself or with neighborhood children while the adults went about tending the home. Often my mother would gather the neighborhood children together and sing with us and read stories. It was not called “home-based preschool” back then. It was just life, like breathing.

Thirty years later, when I was teaching in a mixed-age Waldorf kindergarten, it was a joy to create the flow of activities, time for active robust play and for quiet listening, for being together in a group or skipping away with a best friend, for cleaning and caring, for baking and eating, time to create useful and beautiful things and time to dig in the sand. The daily, weekly, and seasonal rhythms were like breathing in and out.

The Waldorf kindergarten was, and is, a place that honors childhood. In my experience, it was even more: it was a haven. As a founding teacher, there was always more to deal with than just the parents and children of my own kindergarten. There were faculty meetings, college meetings, board meetings, festival committee meetings,

long-range planning meetings, and so on. Going out into the school to attend to such things was like venturing out into the world. Returning to my kindergarten was like “coming home.” Elementary school colleagues would occasionally come into my kindergarten in the afternoon to rest while their children were with another teacher. The couch was there to welcome them.

The kindergarten was not a classroom. It was a child’s play garden. Over the years as the kindergarten became more and more permeated with our routines and rituals, our ebbs and flows, our joys and sorrows, our work and play, the room became like a silent pedagogue, the walls embracing us like a benevolent grandmother who sees all but knows when to turn her head to allow just the right measure of mischief. I remember those joyful occasions when I would step out of the room just before clean up time was finished, knowing the pure delight it provided the children to “barricade” the door while they completed the final details of putting things away. When the children opened the door, I would walk back in, not as the teacher, but as the village inspector to a chorus of giggles as I noticed all the marvelous detail that had gone into the tidying away. We were our own little community, and even when I was a younger teacher, I felt like the beloved grandmother or auntie who welcomed the neighborhood children over to play for a few hours in the morning. At the end of the morning, the children left with their parents or caregivers to go home or to visit with friends.

Over the years some things began to change. Children who had been in traditional institutional childcare since infancy were beginning to come into the kindergarten. Many of them did not understand how to enter into self-directed imaginative play. Other children came who had not been in child care but had been enrolled in multiple enrichment programs since they were toddlers. Many children also needed care beyond the kindergarten morning. Some families requested this extension because both parents needed to work in order to afford tuition for a Waldorf/Steiner school. Others simply felt that their children thrived in the longer day with

other children rather than at home. The reasons for wanting the longer hours varied, but the requests were strong. Also, more families with children younger than three emphatically asked, “What programs do you have for my child?” They made it clear that, while Waldorf/Steiner education was their first choice, if our schools could not serve their needs, they would go elsewhere.

Parents were seeking “more” for their children – more hours, more years in school, more activities, more time away from home. In this age of individualized loneliness, parents were also seeking community and were asking for guidance on how to be with their children. How were we, as Waldorf schools, going to meet these needs?

Schools began offering extended days. Children who needed the extended day would gather from all of the early childhood programs and have lunch together, followed by rest time, then a light snack and a bit more play time before being picked up. Some schools included lunch as part of the kindergartens and then dismissed the children to aftercare or to go home. Typically the early childhood aftercare program ended when the elementary school day ended around 3 p.m. Children who needed even later care would go to another aftercare program until 5 or 6 p.m. This continues to be the pattern for many schools. Others are beginning to offer full-day kindergartens to avoid so much switching around for the children.

To respond to parents’ requests to serve younger children, many schools began offering “nursery” or “preschool” programs for children just under three to a little over four. Some even began accepting a few two-year-olds. At my school it was called the Wonder Garden, and I remember the wise insights of its first teacher Laura Cassidy when she noted that it simply did not work to have a “pressed down” kindergarten morning for these little ones. She noted how much slower the pace needed to be with only little ones present and no older children there to help or model for them. She recognized that bodily care, dressing and undressing, toileting, and such were valid and important parts of their daily experience and needed to be given plenty of time.

Schools also began offering programs to stem the tide of loneliness of the parents and to bring in even younger children. Called parent-child programs or playgroups, these programs were

usually one morning a week for a couple of hours. In some schools, parent-infant or parent-toddler programs were also offered. They have become so popular that several groups convene throughout the week. Many schools have begun to see them as enrollment builders, although many teachers view them primarily as support for parents. They want to strengthen the healthy development of families regardless of whether the families later enroll in their schools. Typically, many families do enroll in the school because they have been inspired by their experience in the parent-child programs.

These expanding programs that kept the children at the school for longer hours and brought children out of their homes at younger and younger ages were not always welcomed into our Waldorf/Steiner early childhood movement. In some schools there was excitement about this development. Others treaded forward with trepidation. Still others chose not to have young children in any school program other than the kindergartens. Why the resistance? Let us consider the following statement by Dr. Rudolf Steiner regarding the child in the first three years:

*The first two-and-a-half years are the most important of all. During this time the child has the gift of being instinctively aware of everything that goes on around it, especially as regards the people who come in daily contact with it. Everything that takes place in its environment imprints itself on its physical bodily form. . . so that our behavior will influence its disposition to health or disease for the whole of its after life.*  
(Understanding Young Children: Extracts from Lectures by Rudolf Steiner, WECAN Publications)

Steiner speaks of the first three years of life with great reverence. He impels us to understand the depth of responsibility we take on while in the presence of these little ones so recently arrived from the realms of spirit. As poet William Wordsworth wrote in his poem “Intimations of Immortality,” “trailing clouds of glory do we come from God who is our home.” Our movement has a very protective gesture toward this early period of life, holding as an ideal the image of the child at home, cared for by a loving family. To open programs for children under three-and-a-half, even though accompanied by their parents, was a big step for us to take.

Yet the phenomenon of playgroups was

becoming a cultural norm. If we did not provide these opportunities, parents would find them elsewhere. Many schools decided it would be wise to support families who were seeking not only community with other parents but also guidance about raising their children. Today parent-child teachers are grateful to meet these families who, regardless of lifestyle and parenting practices, have found their way to our schools. Every parent-child teacher can share testimonials of how the program has helped families make life-changing choices for their homes.

Now, let us consider the resistance to extending the school day for kindergarten children. Again, there was a long-held belief that the best place for young children was the home. The hope was that after a morning in the kindergarten, the children would go home and have lunch followed by a nap, then an afternoon of play. What has been happening for years, however, in North America, is that children who were being picked up after kindergarten were not necessarily going home. Perhaps they were going out to lunch and then to run errands or to attend a variety of “enrichment” classes such as ballet, music, gymnastics, or sports. Partly for this reason, some schools began adding lunch to the end of the kindergarten morning. Others began experimenting with extended day programs. It was a new dimension of our work, and we did not necessarily know how best to go about it.

At my school our first attempt at offering an extended day for the kindergarten children resulted in cranky, tired children coming to school the next day after they attended aftercare. Over the years and with dedicated intention on the part of those carrying the afternoon program, things improved. We changed the name to TLC (Tender Loving Care) and consciousness was given to how the transition took place from the kindergarten morning to the afternoon. The kindergarten teachers worked with the TLC teachers to build a conscious bridge of care and loving exchange. Currently most schools offer some type of extended day for their youngest children.

Today a common experience in our schools is as follows: a child as young as an infant or toddler comes to school with a parent or caregiver to attend a parent-child program for a few years, followed by attending a nursery or pre-school program for a

year or two, followed by attending a kindergarten program, and often spending the afternoons with different teachers in an extended day program. Some children experience two extended day programs because the program for young children ends at 3:00 or so, and then they switch to the “after school” program that goes to 5:00 or 6:00 p.m. In the course of a day, they may have been with three different sets of teachers. The good news is that the children do not have to travel to a whole different school or day care program in the afternoons.

However, for many Steiner/Waldorf early childhood educators this is not the type of schedule they desire for young children. Consider this quote from Dr. Steiner in the book *The Child's Changing Consciousness*:

*The task of the kindergarten teacher is to adapt the practical activities of daily life so that they are suitable for the child's imitation through play. . . The activities of children in kindergarten must be derived directly from life itself rather than being “thought out” by the intellectualized culture of adults. In the kindergarten, the most important thing is to give the children the opportunity to directly imitate life itself.*

Taking into account the current culture of adult life in the Western world with its busyness and days filled with a variety of activities and comings and goings and restlessness, this model of shifting the children from one setting to the next throughout the day is very contemporary. But is it the lifestyle we want them to imitate when they are so young? Does it allow the space and time for them to penetrate their play? Does it meet the fundamental needs of the young child?

In *The Kingdom of Childhood* Dr. Steiner said, “The joy of children in and with their environment must therefore be counted among the forces that build and shape the physical organs.” He went on to say in *Essentials of Education*, “For the small child before the change of teeth, the most important thing in education is the teacher's own being.” Compare this to what contemporary pediatrician Dr. T. Berry Brazelton says in his book *The Irreducible Needs of Children*: “Supportive, warm, nurturing emotional interactions with infants and young children. . . help the central nervous system grow appropriately.” While young children may exhibit amazing levels of

resiliency, are we best serving their needs by shifting their environment and their teachers/caregivers so frequently?

In the mid-nineties, the Waldorf Kindergarten Association noticed that many teachers had begun caring for children in their homes, some for personal reasons and others because they felt that they could better provide the type of seamless day and rhythmical flow in which young child thrive. At the East Coast Waldorf Kindergarten conference in 1996 one of the workshops was specifically for individuals offering childcare in homes or centers. Many who attended spoke with tender vulnerability of their sense of being viewed as “wrong” to offer care for infants and toddlers or to offer care for long days. They experienced a pervasive feeling that this was not the Waldorf way and that children needed to be at home before the kindergarten years and needed to go back home each day after kindergarten.

Rather than being criticized for their efforts, the people attending the workshop were thanked for taking the courageous step of trying to meet the needs of the times. Not long after that, the Waldorf Kindergarten Association changed its name to the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America (WECAN), sending a clear message that they were not only an association of teachers in kindergartens but also included colleagues in a variety of other venues.

Around this same time, Rena Osmer and I, both WECAN board members, began traveling and visiting traditional child care centers in the U.S. and studying the changes that were taking place in home life. There had been a paradigm shift regarding the daily life of the young child. Typically, fifty years ago, the home was the place where the children played and hung out and learned about daily life, and the kindergarten was where parents sent them for artistic and playful enrichment for a couple of hours in the morning. The parental home was still the place where children experienced the main thrust of domestic life. Currently in our culture, parents are drawn to taking their children out of the home for increased stimuli. The activities of “housekeeping” or “homemaking” are sometimes relegated to being done when the children are not at home or when they are sleeping. As will be mentioned later, the daily life experiences of what makes a household

function are becoming less and less common for children.

Rena and I became convinced that it was time for Steiner-based childcare and support for parents to grow and be strengthened in North America. With respect for those who had already begun to work in these arenas and with an interest in expanding even further, we explored the question of what we thought Steiner-based childcare would ideally look like. Our conclusion was that it would be imitative of the qualities and activities found in healthy, rhythmical home life – the ways of life. Thus came the name LifeWays, which we adapted from our friends who wrote the first *Lifeways* books. By 1998, the first LifeWays Child Care Center was opened in rural southeast Wisconsin and several others have opened since.

LifeWays centers and homes are designed to feel like home-away-from-home. Too often the missing ingredients in traditional childcare settings are consistency, warmth, and long lasting relationships. The heart of LifeWays childcare is the “Family Suite” in which children, caregivers, and families develop long-term relationships in an environment that protects childhood and enhances optimal physical, socio-emotional, cognitive, and spiritual health for the children and the caregivers. What ages the various sites care for and how long their days run vary from place to place.

The Milwaukee LifeWays Child Development Center has three suites with a full blend of ages from infant to six. They offer care from 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Some caregivers choose to work for eight hours a day while others prefer to share a suite and work part-time. Set up to imitate a large family, there are usually seven to eight children in a suite with a primary caregiver. With three suites, they function like a small neighborhood or extended family. All the children get to know all the caregivers, and they have a special connection to their primary caregivers. The caregivers are supported by a part-time administrator (who is also the parent-child teacher), other part-time caregivers, a cook, a kindergarten teacher, and volunteers. The older children of the suites may attend the preschool or the forest kindergarten two or three mornings a week and are sometimes joined by community children who come only for the preschool or kindergarten. During this time, the youngest

children in the suites have a quiet time with their caregivers, similar to how it is at home when older siblings go off to school for a while. When they return to the suite, the infants and toddlers are delighted to see them.

In addition to LifeWays centers, there are individuals who offer LifeWays childcare and/or preschool in their homes. In many ways this is ideal. They are already in a home so they don't have to imitate being in a home. Trisha Lambert in Davis, California is a "Full" WECAN member and a LifeWays "Representative." She was a Waldorf kindergarten teacher in a school before deciding to offer care at her home. She was doing this already before the LifeWays organization began. Initially inspired by Helle Heckmann in Denmark, Trisha and the children spend a long time outside each day exploring the numerous gardens and grounds surrounding her home. Trisha prepares meals and snacks for the children, and they sleep in the living room and bedroom of her home. Most days they have a little time for some simple circle games and a story, and if there is a baby in the mix, the baby plays or sleeps while the other children sing and play. Like the Milwaukee LifeWays Center, Trisha has an ongoing waiting list. Many families feel that the simplicity of daily living offered in these settings is what best serves their children, and often wonderful stories emerge of how families begin to slowly transform their own homes to be more reflective of the practices they have observed.

The rhythms and activities of the days and weeks in a LifeWays setting are meant to imitate home life rather than school life – daily care and cleaning of the environment, bodily care of the children, doing laundry, putting away groceries, eating, sleeping, singing and playing, and crafting for special seasonal activities. While the cook prepares the organic lunch each day, the caregivers and children in each suite participate throughout the week in the preparation of the food – for example, peeling carrots, chopping onions, etc. Whether or not the children actively participate in the work being done, they thrive within the environment of the focused work of their caregivers.

Called "The Living Arts" (Domestic, Nurturing, Creative, and Social), these daily life activities are quietly disappearing from the routine experience of many children today. In full-day care it is easier to

experience a natural flow of these activities without feeling hurried. One notices that the children have more time to penetrate such things as putting on their shoes, brushing their teeth, having their hair brushed, getting dressed to go outside, and watching a baby being fed or diapered. The breath of the mid-day sleep also helps. Whether or not the caregiver also sleeps (some do), there is a natural shift that takes place that allows for a qualitatively different experience from morning to afternoon. When they awaken from nap and have their hair brushed and faces oiled (a practice adopted from Bernadette Raichle's Awhina child care center in New Zealand), they are ready for the slower pace of afternoon play and getting ready to go home.

The caregivers attend a mentor-supported, one-year, part-time LifeWays training that introduces them to the Living Arts as well as to the LifeWays principles and suggested practices. Human development is taught from the spiritual scientific insights of Rudolf Steiner and contemporary child development experts. Students experience music, movement, and speech classes to strengthen them as human beings worthy of being imitated by young children. They are offered numerous handwork classes, including an introduction to gardening, to steep them in the practical, yet aesthetic, craft of homemaking. Other parts of the training focus on working with regulatory agencies as well as how to work with parents and colleagues. A unique aspect of the LifeWays training is that the students are comprised of parents, childcare providers, home-based preschool teachers, parent educators, and grandparents. The common denominator is the understanding that the fundamental needs of young children can be met through the life activity of the home regardless of whether you are a stay-at-home parent or a childcare provider or a parent educator.

Just as it was a privilege to teach in a Waldorf kindergarten so many years ago, it is an equal privilege to be a part of the ongoing development of Steiner-inspired childcare. While going back in time is not the answer, many Waldorf/Steiner early childhood educators have discovered the value of slowing down, shifting the emphasis to daily life activities, and expanding their time with children in their care. LifeWays is one part of this expanded work of Waldorf/Steiner educators. There are others who have been offering child care for two decades

or longer, and there are others offering training and support for parent-child teachers and teachers who wish to be involved with birth-to-three work.

At the Waldorf early childhood conference in New York in 2006, the keynote speaker was Dr. Michaela Gloeckler, director of the medical section at the Goetheanum. Susan Silverio, director of the Northeast LifeWays training, shared her notes quoting Dr. Gloeckler as follows: "Teach beyond guilt. Teach out of joy! Open up kindergartens outside of the school landscape! Organize farming/play afternoons in family homes. Receive children as early as possible and keep them as long as possible."

We are pleased to be involved with this expanded consciousness around early childhood practices and family support, and we are grateful to the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America for having the foresight and warmth of heart to support individuals and organizations that are furthering the work. It is a breath of fresh air.

*Cynthia Aldinger is Executive Director of LifeWays North America and serves on the Board of W/ECAN. A former Waldorf Kindergarten teacher and childcare provider, she has taught children, parents and caregivers for over twenty years.*