

The St Michael Steiner School Early Years Curriculum for the Older child in kindergarten (5-6 year olds)

At The St Michael Steiner School, children benefit from an “unhurried childhood”. They have the opportunity to embed basic skills (physical, emotional, social and cognitive), and develop lifelong learning habits that enable them to become enthusiastic, imaginative, resilient, creative and eager to learn students. Children can join kindergarten from three years of age and stay until they are rising seven. We follow the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (with some exemptions granted by the DfE along with all Steiner Waldorf settings) for children up to the age of five.

How children learn in kindergarten

In the first seven years, the young child learns to be at home in the physical body, developing an orientation in space and acquiring the developmental capacities of uprightness, speech and thought. The content of the child’s whole environment is the learning context; the child imitates the people and the agencies that are in their environment.

In the kindergarten, experiential learning, discovery through free creative play and social interaction with peers and teachers constitute the main education themes. Awareness of the complexities of language and numbers is acquired through play, daily activities and social interaction. In the seventh year, the child begins to develop the faculty for independent, representational, pictorial thinking. The formal schooling process begins in Class 1 when writing and reading are introduced.

An experiential and active learning environment

All learning in a Steiner Waldorf kindergarten, including pre-literacy and numeracy, is experiential and connected to meaningful activities that are available every day. The mixed age group of three to six-year-olds provides a unique space. Younger children can benefit from becoming part of the social fabric of the kindergarten, developing at their own pace through observation, imitation of and joining in with their older peers. Older children can ‘step-up’ in all areas of kindergarten life. They can use their initiative, extend and individualise activities, take responsibility, lead and develop independence.

Older children may volunteer or be asked to prepare the table for snack, count the number of chairs, match bowls and cups, including adding or taking away numbers. Children measure and weigh ingredients for baking, develop and use mathematical language such as heavy and light, more or less. Children experience weight, height and gravity especially when engaging in large construction play, both indoors and outside. Older children can volunteer or be asked to help younger children get ready for the garden and serve food at snack-times. Conversation around the meal table often leads to e.g. ‘how many children are present, the ages of those present, (and siblings), and ages in past/future times.

Children acquire a rich vocabulary through the repetition of stories told by the teachers, and songs and verses which the children gradually come to know and often love by heart. Older children may be asked to help the teacher with puppet shows and are given space and time to make up their own stories and puppet shows. Children learn to read their name and those of others by observing name labels and often want to practice writing for birthday and other cards, menus for the annual pancake café and signs for games.

Children are supported to build up stamina: the ability to pay attention for longer periods of time, persistence, and the ability to complete a task they have begun.

All these are skills which facilitate a gentle transition to the formal learning stage which in our school takes place in the child's seventh year.

The big children's club

In the spring and summer terms, the older children from both kindergarten groups come together each week for a whole morning. During this session, they are given opportunities for crafts, often making a hobby horse which develops the following skills: wool: washing and carding fleece, winding skeins into balls, making felt then cutting & sewing it, finger knitting; wood: measuring, sawing, shaving, sanding, drilling; Tools: use of carders, threading needles, pins, scissors, sandpaper, saws, peelers, hand drills. Children work at their own pace and often offer to help each other. The morning usually includes drawing in books, more complex ring games, a shared meal, free play and a longer walk. These activities are more formalized and intended to extend the learning in an effort to strengthen the will forces, widening and deepening children's experiences in a planned manner which is related both to the individual children's needs and interests, and the needs and interest of the whole group.

In the last term of the kindergarten yearly cycle, the stories and puppet shows told to all the children are ones that meet the inner mood and development of the older children. The last story and puppet show is part of the end-of-year festival and is chosen specifically for the group leaving for Class 1 or other school environments. The last day of the school year includes a short ceremony for these children, honouring their time in kindergarten, and their readiness to move on.

Assessment and transition to Class 1

During the spring/summer term the older children are assessed for their readiness for Class 1. A child might benefit from another year in kindergarten, specific help may be given to a child to enable them overcome minor hindrances, so that they are ready to take the step towards Class 1, or a new type of learning.

The decision for cusp children (those turning six in June, July and August) to remain in kindergarten or to move up to Class 1 is made over the spring and summer term. Input is gathered from parents, along with the class teacher, eurythmist, kindergarten teachers and the school's anthroposophical medical advisor.

During the spring and/or summer term, all rising Class 1 children are presented in Child Study to the whole school faculty. When their class teacher has been appointed, he or she is able to meet with the kindergarten teachers to discuss each child more fully, and where possible spend time in the kindergarten with the children. Parents will meet the Class 1 teacher, who will also hold a class family picnic before the start of the new term.

On the first day of the first term, the Class 1 Ceremony includes the children meeting their teacher, presenting them with a gift and being led by their teacher to their first school assembly.