

The St Michael Steiner School Early Years Curriculum Policy for Kindergarten (Ages 3 - 6 years old)

This overview should be read in conjunction with the Early Years “EYFS policy” and the “Curriculum policy for the Older Child in Kindergarten”.

The Kindergarten

Children enter the kindergarten between the ages of three and six years old. Group sizes vary with a maximum of sixteen in the cottage kindergarten and thirteen in the main school kindergarten. Five morning sessions per week are offered, each session lasting four hours. Children take up provision according to age and need. An afternoon session is available for four afternoons a week. A fine and flexible balance has to be maintained between parental needs and what is healthy for the young child.

General Principles

Cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills are accorded equal value in the kindergarten and many different competencies are developed. Activities reflect the concerns, interests and developmental stages of the child and the carefully structured environment is designed to foster both personal and social learning.

Teaching is by example, rather than by direct instruction, and is integrated rather than subject-based. The curriculum is adapted to the child. In recognition of its vital role in early education, free creative play is an important and essential part of kindergarten life, as is time outside in nature.

Emphasis is given to regular patterns of activities both within the day and over each week. A cyclical pattern is reflected in themes of work related to the seasons of the year.

The Nature of Early Childhood

Physical, emotional, cognitive and social development are subtly and inextricably linked. This view underpins and informs the early years curriculum, which is tailored to meet the child's changing needs during each phase.

At each developmental stage, the child presents a particular set of physical, emotional, intellectual and social characteristics, which require a particular (empathetic) educational response in return. This is the basis of a child-centered education. The formative period before the second dentition is seen as the period of greatest physical growth and development. Structures in the brain are being refined and elaborated, a process which is not completed until after puberty, and until that time the young child's primary mode of learning is through doing and experiencing - they 'think' with the entire physical being.

The nature of this early learning should be self-motivated, allowing the child to come to know the world in the most appropriate way to their age - through active feeling, touching, exploring and imitating, in other words, through doing. Only when new capabilities appear, at around the seventh year, is the child physically, emotionally and

intellectually ready for formal instruction. Through experiential, self-motivated physical activity the small child 'grasps' the world in order to understand it - an essential prerequisite for the later activity of grasping the world through concepts. Children are encouraged to gain physical skills before abstract intellectual ones.

Early Childhood Care and Education - Aims and Objectives

We provide opportunities for children to be active in meaningful imitation. To complement the maturational timetable we acknowledge imitation as the prime means of children's learning - hence adults in our kindergartens teach and work in a way that enables the children to imitate, most of what children learn at this stage is imparted by example. The child learns about life from life and children model their behaviour on what happens around them. Adult activities stimulate direct responses in the young child and teachers carry out their daily tasks in such a way as to be worthy of imitation.

The kindergarten is a community of "doers" and we support our community through our work, for example by baking our own bread. The children are encouraged to help. The activity of the teachers and assistants may inspire the children to become independently active, finding their own learning situations in play. Children perceive and register not only everything the adults do, but how they do it. Teachers are conscious of their own moral influence upon the child and of the development of good habits through imitation. We provide a range of suitable activities for imitation taking place in the kindergarten, domestic tasks such as baking, cooking, cleaning, caring for the room, and others - all activities with a social, practical, moral and educational basis, as well as a wide range of artistic activities.

The forces of imitation, which are so important in helping the young child to know and understand the world in this first phase, naturally diminish and give way to a new kind of knowing which appears at around the time of second dentition. This is the time when teaching 'by example' moves into more formal teaching by instruction. The curriculum changes as one phase of child development comes to a close and another begins. Further information about our curriculum for the older kindergarten child may be found in the "Older Child in the Kindergarten Curriculum" policy. There is a similar shift in our curriculum at age 14, which corresponds to the changes which occur at puberty.

Working with rhythm and repetition

The kindergarten identifies rhythm as an important educational principle. Children need the reassurance of continuity and regular events mark the kindergarten year, week and day. Seasonal activities celebrate the cycles of the year - autumn in kindergarten might be a time for threshing and grinding and spring a time for planting. The seasonal table in the room reflects the changing natural world throughout the year, as do the themes of songs, stories and poems. In addition, each week has its own regular rhythm of recurring activities, e.g., baking day, painting day, and craft day.

Every day has its own smaller rhythms, which support the daily activities. These daily rhythms help the child feel secure and know what to expect, a tidy-up song or poem, for example, signals the transition time between one activity and the beginning of another. The day is structured so that there is a varied pace - with periods of contraction and expansion - providing a balance between times of activity and times of rest. In practice, this means that creative play is followed by a more concentrated circle time, and

energetic outdoor activity by a story and listening time. There is a rhythmic alternation between the 'child's time' (creative play, outside time) and the teacher's time (ring-time, story), the teacher's time being comparatively short at this stage. The transition periods are carefully considered to ensure changes are smooth and unhurried. Working with rhythm helps children live with change, find their place in the world, and begin to understand the past, present and future. Rhythm provides a very real foundation for the understanding of time - what has gone before and what will follow - and helps children relate to the natural and the human world. Attention to rhythm promotes healthy development and leads to a balanced life later.

Repetition also plays a key role in establishing continuity and in the healthy development of memory. Children's memories are strengthened by recurring experiences and the daily, weekly and yearly events in kindergarten are remembered and often eagerly anticipated a second time around. Stories are told not just once, but many times - repetition brings the opportunity for children to familiarise themselves with the material and to deepen their relationship to it.

Encouraging personal, social and moral development

Children learn, through their creative play and through their daily social activities, to interact with each other. In kindergarten they learn to share, work together, and co-operate. They know and trust their teachers and are able to establish effective relationships with other children and adults. Teachers and children care for and respect each other.

We place much emphasis on caring for the environment - both indoors and outdoors. Wooden toys, for example, can be polished and mended. Gardening - including planting, harvesting and composting activities - introduce children to concepts of ecology and form an important part of the curriculum.

There are moments of reverence each day and teachers lovingly create opportunities for children to experience joy, awe and wonder. Kindness is practised by teachers and encouraged in the children. Festivals provide rich cultural and spiritual experiences for the child. Traditional fairy tales and nature stories address the feeling realm and gradually awaken a fine moral sense for knowing right from wrong. The teacher sets the example and has certain expectations of the children.

Mathematics within an integrated learning experience

The learning experience of children under seven is an integrated experience, not compartmentalised. Young children experience the relevance of their world before they separate themselves from it and begin to analyse it in a detached way. Consequently learning in kindergarten is integrated rather than subject based. Mathematics and use of mathematical language, for example, might take place at the cooking table, where food is prepared (thinly sliced carrots make wonderful natural circles and have the added virtue of being able to be eaten later in soup!) and concepts such as addition and subtraction (or more or less), weight, measure, quantity and shape are grasped in a practical manner as part of daily life. Mealtimes offer opportunities for moral, social and mathematical to come together as children engage in place setting and the sharing of food, which has been prepared earlier for everyone to eat.

Through movement games, children recognise and recreate patterns - in, out, alternate, in front of, behind. Natural objects such as acorns, pinecones, conkers and shells are sorted, ordered and counted, as part of spontaneous play. Children are directly involved in mathematical experience and use mathematical language in a natural way, which is usually embedded in a social and moral context. Learning experiences for the young child are not separated from the business of daily living: learning gains meaning by its relevance to life.

Language and literacy

A similar approach is taken to the teaching of language and literacy. Children develop competence in talking, listening and in the ability to use words with confidence when they speak freely and learn to listen to others. Good speech and the development of aural skills are promoted, for example around the meal table where conversation skills are developed and honed. At daily story time, children listen to many wonderful stories which belong to the diverse literary heritage of the culture of childhood.

A well-told story creates an appreciation for the human voice and the beauty and rhythms of language. It also helps to extend vocabulary and to aid the development of a good memory. Children leave kindergarten with a rich and varied repertoire of songs, stories and poems, this might also include verses or words in other languages. Much of this learning will have taken place in the integrated way described - although story-time is always a very special event. Stories are also brought to the children in the form of puppet shows, which help those children who are learning English as an additional language understand the stories. We strive to tell stories from the parts of the world our children and or their families come from.

Children engage in many activities, such as sewing, which develop hand-eye co-ordination, manual dexterity and orientation (useful preparation for reading print from left to right). Some children may choose to discuss their own drawings and take great delight in telling stories by 'reading' their pictures. This activity promotes the development of verbal skills and frees the narrative from the printed text, thus encouraging children to use their own words. Others may be in a non-verbal sensory experience, living into the colour, swirls and shapes and this is valid. Many children act out stories or perform puppet shows and develop dramatic skills through working with narrative and dialogue. Painting and drawing help with balance and symmetry, shape and form, as well as, fostering a feeling for colour, an opportunity for experimentation and artistic expression. Most five-year-olds are able to write their own name. Children experience the musicality of language and its social aspects through playing ring games and eurythmy, a form of movement, which works with language and music.

The combination of these activities cultivates a love of language, promotes fluency and allows children time to become really familiar with the spoken word - the best preparation and foundation for the subsequent development of literacy. Use of language also affects cognitive development as well-chosen words and good syntax support clear thinking.

Encouraging learning through creative play and supporting physical development

Children are able to exercise and consolidate their ability to understand and to think through their play. Creative free play supports cognitive, physical, emotional and social

development and allows children to learn through investigation, exploration and discovery. It also gives scope for the use of imagination - an essential aspect of human intelligence. Uninterrupted play encourages the child to become inventive and adaptable, and to work with initiative and flair. In addition, it develops and strengthens concentration.

Latest research shows that children who engage in socio-dramatic play also demonstrate the greatest gains in a number of cognitive areas such as higher intellectual competence, longer attention span, and more innovation and imaginativeness. Children who are more involved in play also show more empathy toward others, less aggression, and in general more social and emotional adjustment. We offer long periods of time and space each morning and afternoon for free creative play, both indoors and outside, and a selection of suitable objects and open-ended materials, for instance cloths, shells, logs, planks, domestic toys and dolls are provided to support a variety of play situations.

Encouraging children to know and love the world

Children develop a healthy relationship to the natural world. They learn to value its gifts and to understand its processes and patterns of change. Domestic tasks, using a range of 'warm technology' (e.g., hand whisks, scales, simple woodwork tools) provide opportunities for elementary experiences in science and good use is made of the four elements. Children make toys from sheep's wool, wood, felt, cotton and other natural materials. Many items are made as gifts for family members. Family participation is encouraged and teachers, working with parents, create 'birthday stories' which are based on the child's personal biography and are told at special ceremonies to which families may be invited.

People in the community who practise a particular craft, or who have special skills, may be invited to visit kindergarten and we regularly take children for short local walks in the park. Festivals from the children's cultures are celebrated with parents' support, who provide background information and traditional practices.

Providing a safe child-friendly environment

The kindergarten provides a warm and welcoming environment, an artistically shaped free space with indoor and outdoor facilities that serve as the setting for what the day's impulse brings. This 'impulse' is a mixture of child motivated play experiences and teacher-structured activities. There are few 'finished' toys, which demand to be used in a predetermined way. Furniture is small-scale and child-friendly and, as mentioned, the day is structured to provide children with balanced periods of activity and rest. Groups are of a mixed age range and older children, who are familiar with the rhythm of the kindergarten and are able to help the younger members of the group to feel secure.

Working with parents

We are committed to establishing good relationships with parents and to the process of developing parenting skills. We recognise the importance of a happy, smooth transition from home to school and work closely with parents to achieve this. Many children join kindergarten after attending Parent & Child sessions with early childhood staff and they visit the kindergarten during these sessions to help ease the transition. Parent & Child sessions are provided for parents and their children from birth to four years of age. These can enable a gradual, supported approach for families becoming part of the

school community. They also offer a developmentally appropriate introduction to the principles behind work and play in early childhood. We encourage parents, if possible, to attend Parent & Child group sessions before their child joins kindergarten, to help establish a good rapport with the family. The teachers promote and emphasise the importance of close partnerships with parents and provide a focus for parent support. Links are also created with parents through a range of social and school-based events and activities.

An example of a kindergarten session

Each day of the week would have its own main focus and these vary with the changing seasons. The kindergarten staff take time to prepare their kindergartens both before the children arrive in the morning and after they have gone. There are activities and materials to prepare, of course, as well as a positive and calm mood to create. The staff team often meet in the morning to say a verse together before greeting the children.

Depending on the time of year (and weather), kindergarten may start indoors or in the garden. In either case, as the children begin to arrive, the kindergarten staff are already busy with meaningful and purposeful activities so that the children, having changed clothing appropriately (waterproofs and wellies for outside, indoor slippers for indoors), can be given a homely welcome. The first hour or so provides for a period of free play with groups of children choosing their interest area, perhaps getting the dolls dressed, building with small logs or driving a bus made from an upturned chair. The adults are engaged in a task, such as preparing the dough if it is baking day. There is conversation and some of the children may prefer to be around the adults, as children traditionally have been, watching, 'helping', while adults work, asking questions and so on. These informal moments are vital, not least in a world in which everyone is often so busy. Children are free to come and join the adult-led activity, or deepen their play.

The adults initiate the next phase by beginning to tidy away and the children join in helping each tool or object to find its place on a shelf or in a basket. The forces of imitation are strongest at this age, and can be most easily directed when the adults perform their tasks in a conscious and careful way, repeating the gestures of each action in a rhythmical and natural way. Children can learn to do quite complex practical tasks, even involving sharp or awkward tools or equipment, if they see them regularly performed with love and care.

Tidying up is done in such a way that it mostly does not occur to the children that this is something which spoils their fun or is a tedious chore. Once things have been put back in their places, the children gather for ring-time during which traditional songs are sung, rhythmical verses are spoken and acted out. Most weeks the school eurythmist visits and brings her own ring-time with movements and a story appropriate for the kindergarten. These activities help focus the children's attention and especially strengthen their linguistic skills. Listening and clear articulation can be exercised through this kind of rhythmical recitation. Afterwards, the children go to the toilet and wash their hands. Children help lay and set the table with cutlery, bowls and perhaps a vase of flowers or some decorations. Everyone gathers to say a seasonal verse. There is no deliberate effort to teach the children in any formal sense. The children imitate the conscious activity of the teacher.

Following the morning snack, some of the children help clear up/wash up while others go off to a second period of free play or another artistic or handicraft activity. Here the children follow by example and may paint or model for as long as their interest lasts. This might be the time to go outdoors into the garden or sandpit, or may even involve a walk to a nearby park. Once everyone returns, coats and scarves are hung up, things are carefully put away and then all gather in the 'story circle'. The morning concludes with the kindergarten teacher telling a fairy tale or nature story. By then the parents are waiting outside to collect the children (12.30 pm). Some children remain in kindergarten for lunch club and the afternoon session. In this case, after a short play and preparation of the room for another meal, lunch is eaten. After lunch, the children are taken for a quiet time/rest in the Cottage kindergarten. The older kindergarten children may have a quiet time while looking at some books or doing handicraft activities such as fingerknitting or weaving, followed by outdoor play in the garden. All children are collected from the garden at the end of the session (3 pm).

Each day of the week has its own artistic or handicraft activity, such as a baking day. Details of our weekly activities can be found in the Early Years Parents' Handbook. The kindergarten offers activities such as watercolour painting, drawing with wax crayons, beeswax modelling and eurythmy, and the handicrafts vary according to the facilities or seasons. In all these activities the children learn by example, finding their way into the experiences at their own pace. In this way the children learn to explore and be creative whilst acquiring a love of work. This manifests itself in an increasing mood of self-reliance and calm industriousness when the children are engaged. The same mood is carried over into creative play. A strong and lively rhythm helps give the children a deep sense of security.

We recognise the ever growing need for children to be outside in nature experiencing all it offers. This is especially important for children in built-up city areas. Apart from our weekly indoor/outdoor rhythm we offer one morning a week where all of kindergarten children come together in the large garden to help build a fire where soup is cooked and later is the focal point to sit around and enjoy snack time.

The Older child in the Kindergarten

Children in their last year of kindergarten have opportunities for additional responsibilities that being the oldest child brings. In the last two terms of the year, the older children spend one morning a week together undertaking special projects and activities. Please see our separate 'Curriculum for the Older child in kindergarten' (post EYFS).