

The Fountain School - Cardiff Steiner Initiative

The Right to Play

The Fountain School is a growing community based project involving over 50 families from the Cardiff area and is based at council owned premises in Adamsdown. It aims to provide high quality care and education for children from 0 to 7 by working closely with parents, schools and other local community services. The Fountain School is committed to making Steiner Waldorf education available to all that want it, regardless of religion, race, physical ability, social or financial background. As a registered charity, the School is run by a dedicated team of parents and teachers and currently receives no external funding. Parents pay fees worked out on a percentage of income and also contribute through fund-raising activities and donations. Early Years practitioners and teachers from local schools regularly visit the school as part of their in service training. The school runs regular workshops for parents and teachers and is currently offering a series of monthly talks on different aspects of education in the early years.

Steiner Waldorf Kindergartens aim to provide the conditions in which real play can flourish. At the Fountain School we believe in every child's right to play. We welcome the Welsh Assembly Government Play Policy and support its definition of real play. This defines real play as "freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward, and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development - not only for individual children, but also for the society in which they live."

In this presentation I am going to talk about what happens in a Steiner Waldorf Kindergarten and in The Fountain School Kindergarten in particular. I'm going to describe the conditions which we try to create so that real play can happen; for real play to happen there needs to be sufficient time, appropriate space and equipment but most of all there needs to be an attitude of respect from the teacher. I will also list the benefits of play.

Sufficient time

Children at the Fountain School Kindergarten spend a good part of each morning in free, creative play. The rhythm of the morning provides a balance between child-initiated activity and adult led activity.

The Rhythm of the Morning	<i>Child Led</i>	<i>Adult Led</i>
9:00 - 10:45	Creative play	
10:45 - 11:00		Tidy up
11:00 - 11:15		Ring time
11:15 - 11:45		Snack time
11:45 -12:40	Outside play	
12:40 - 13:00		Story Time and goodbye

A balance of activities is provided, allowing time for breathing in and breathing out. There is enough time for many games to be played and for many themes to be explored. During the morning themes flow into one another, involving different groups of children at different times and allowing the inspiration for play to rise and fall.

Appropriate Space and Equipment

The toys and equipment at the Kindergarten are as simple as possible. Open-ended equipment encourages children's imaginations enabling them to develop flexibility, adaptability and creativity. The children play and build with wooden benches, clothes horses, different coloured muslin cloths, plaited woollen ropes as well as simple home made dolls and puppets. Outside there is space to run and skip, sand and mud and water to play in, a wheelbarrow to go riding in and wooden planks to build with. The children all have waterproof overalls so they can go outside whatever the weather.

Respect

For real play to flourish the teacher needs to cultivate an attitude of respect. Teachers at the Fountain School try to develop an active patience, which can create spaciousness within clear boundaries. When children play the adult gesture should be one of respect - "please may I sit beside you while you play?"

It is also the teacher's role to nourish play. The teacher tries always to be engaged in purposeful, meaningful activity inviting the children to be active too. The children can join her, watch her or, inspired by her example, be active in their own way

Good stories nourish play and there is a correlation between stories and the ability to play as both deal with big issues. Stories help the child to understand the world, to explore the themes of good and bad, the big and the little, the oppressors and the oppressed all in a safe environment. Real play does the same thing; in children's play wolves, soldiers, dragons, fairies and witches may not be real but what they represent is. In the Fountain School the children hear good stories with powerful emotional, dramatic, intellectual content and they hear lots of them so that they can become storytellers for themselves.

The Benefits of Play

Real play is deep, absorbing and satisfying. An active childhood with plenty of opportunity to play develops the individual in innumerable ways and is a wonderfully rich resource for the rest of life.

Through play children develop social skills such as co-operation, empathy and negotiation. Through play they imitate their world in order to understand and make sense of it. In an environment which celebrates movement children become confident physically, acquiring fine and gross motor skills. The ability to initiate and self-motivate, which is developed through play, is indispensable for future intellectual learning.

In a play environment every child succeeds and no child fails.

Cath Little, Teacher Fountain School, November 2002

Recommended reading

The Genius of Play - Celebrating the Spirit of Childhood Sally Jenkinson Hawthorn Press [2001]

Free to Learn- Introducing Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Education Lynne Oldfield Hawthorn Press [2001]

Helping Children to overcome Fear - The Healing Power of Play - Hawthorn Press - Russell Evans [2000]