

Waldorf Education Your Questions Answered

Why do you teach through stories throughout the lower school?

“If you want your children to be intelligent, read them fairy tales. If you want them to be more intelligent, read them more fairy tales.” — Albert Einstein



Stories are a natural, time-honoured way for humans to learn, and children can absorb so much from a good story, that it helps them feel as if they lived through it themselves and have learned the same lessons as the protagonists (or antagonists). Children who enjoy a good story often do so because they learn from the characters, the plot line, and even the details of the stories they hear. Having this experience of living through a story's characters help children to feel as if they've learned something valuable, and that is what contributes to confidence building – they now know what to do if faced with similar circumstances and how that would feel as well as understanding their own place in the world.

Steiner perceived that all children go through similar developmental phases which is characterised by both behaviour tendencies and central questions and concerns. They can be supported through each stage by stories that can shine a light on their inner journey. At each year level the stories are chosen to connect deeply with the inner strivings of each developmental age. Children make deep connections with the story curriculum that Rudolf Steiner prescribed.



A morning in a Waldorf Early Childhood almost always includes a story, which may either be told or presented as a puppet play- usually a nature story, a fairy tale or a folk tale. Stories are often told by the teacher “by heart” rather than told by memory because Waldorf teachers aim to tell stories with love from the heart. Of course, a teacher memorizes the story but once it is committed to memory it allows the teacher freedom to make the story their own and to tell the story with joy.



In Class 1 children are met with fairy tales mirroring their inner fantasy-rich world. They provide rich imagery to the dreamy consciousness of the young child. Fairy tales speak an archetypal language of relationships and consequences; of journeys that have a purpose; of crises that have a logical resolution (and not always a happy ending); of challenges that have a higher meaning, and ultimately, they are about transformation and happiness, harmony and balance when order is restored.

As the children progress into Class 2 the stories turn into fables. Fables are moral tales in which the stories are populated by animals and beings that are clearly meant to be anthropomorphic and are characterised by their brevity and sometimes semi-historical context, such as the stories of saints and holy men and women.

The mischief of a monkey or the wisdom of an owl or the slyness of a fox, each caters to the instinctive nature relevant to that child. The fables mirror that mischievous element and offer views of human frailties and foibles whilst the saint stories balance that out by giving them examples of people who did good deeds and offer contrasting images of a higher self.

In class 3 we move into the world of myths and legends expressed in some of the great narratives of ancient human cultures. We start with narratives of creation that express the sense of beginnings that an individual starts

to confront and question as they look at the world as a self-conscious entity. These narratives are treated as oral and written literature, great stories, as myths from classical traditions that speak to the growing child's imagination: they are not treated as statements of presumed fact or faith.

Around the age of 10 (in Class 4) the child confronts the world as a more confident self, confident in a new relationship with the surrounding world. Physical development brings a new strength and agility. The myths of the Norsemen provide a literature that meets this newfound confidence: the robust resilience of these sea-faring peoples in their journeys was fired by the imagery of their mythological world. Of paramount importance is the figure of Loki, who grows from naïve mischief maker to bearer of conscious ill-will. Thus, the children experience consequences through story and strengthen their own social awareness.



By Class 5 we move the students from mythology to legend to history. The basis of the great civilisations is introduced through the religious stories of the cultures and selected stories and biographies connected with the leaders of the time. The students are led into the essence of the ancient civilisations of India, Sumaria, Babylon, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Greece through stories from the sacred writings of these peoples. This overview of the world's cultural and religious history will become a strong basis for much of the continuing studies through the next six years.

In Class 6 we continue the change from mythology to histories. The study of Ancient Rome provides the theme and key Main Lessons of Class 6, integrating language and literature, geography, science and art. The sense of order of the Roman world particularly addresses the needs of the Class 6 child now standing at the threshold of adolescence. The study of Ancient Rome gives a picture of a people establishing a new relationship with the world, separating themselves from their gods and learning to develop their own laws and structures. From the legend of Romulus and Remus studies move to biographies of flesh and blood figures of history and the exploration of everyday life. Stories of the Medieval period also bring vivid pictures of the ideals of nobility, charity, abstinence, truthfulness, mercy, purity, love of humankind and loyalty.



As the students turn thirteen (Class 7) their attention turns outward looking for new discoveries and adventure. To meet these needs the stories now focus on the biographies and events surrounding world navigators and explorers setting out into uncharted areas, often forging a path for their peoples to a new world. The urge to explore, to try new things, to push the boundaries further away, to journey beyond the safety of the known world and to see what lies beyond the horizon, to discover the fabled lands. Then the stories of the Renaissance takes them into a new era of individual entrepreneurship, artistic and technological inventions and innovation, renewed interest in philosophy, scientific exploration, and discovery and more.

By introducing subjects through stories, the children's imagination is engaged and strengthens their inner picturing capabilities—their ability to create a picture in their “mind's eye,” an essential skill for creative thinking later in life. Teaching through stories is found throughout the Waldorf Curriculum allowing us to teach more complex ideas and different points of view. By structuring complex human experience in meaningful ways, we speak deeply to the ever-changing consciousness of the child.