

# Waldorf Education Your Questions Answered

## What is Steiner's model of child development?

Rudolf Steiner was a contemporary of Freud and Piaget but his training as a philosopher took him to look beyond not just brain development but also to look at the social, physical and emotional development.

Steiner emphasized three aspects of the human soul – thinking, feeling and willing. He related these to the physical body: thinking with the brain and nerve system, feeling with the heart and lungs and willing with the limbs and metabolic system. These three faculties develop in an unfolding series of cycles and when fully developed and working harmoniously with each other, we are healthy and well-balanced.

Steiner divided child development into three distinct stages and labelled them based on the primary force driving a child's experience in the world. Ages 0-7 are defined by Will, ages 7-14 by Feeling, and ages 14-21 by Thinking. Whilst each phase is distinct in its own right each metamorphoses into the next. Through each phase, the child works to understand and eventually utilize these forces.

**0-7: Willing** In the first seven years the child is developing their physical body and primarily living in their will. During this period massive changes are happening. All the energy in those first years goes into growing up physically, maintaining body temperature, digesting solid food, learning to walk, learning to speak, developing the nervous system, climbing, dancing, singing.... Never in life does a human being grow physically as much as in this phase, and these are all processes that the body learns unconsciously or by imitation.



The small child is still one with the world around it. External influences still have a great deal of influence on the developing child. Everything the child perceives through the senses is absorbed. Learning is *caught rather than taught* through imitation and play. This in turn elicits the powers of creativity, imagination and intuition.

### **How we can support them**

*The child needs to feel secure in a world of goodness. In a loving, positive, familiar environment that the parents or caregivers create. You do not need to over intellectualise with them but just be a good role model worthy of imitation. Remember the importance of strong rhythms, clear boundaries, plenty of rest, sleep, a good diet and the space and time for the child to play freely so they can develop healthily.*



**7-14: Feeling** The second seven-year period sees the children firmly settle into their bodies. The child's world expands beyond the self, and with this expansion, they develop a great subtlety of feeling. Children's feelings dominate their world in this stage as they move between joy and sadness and learn to manage these different emotions within the greater, more expansive world now open to them.

This phase is the bridge between infancy and adolescence and is characterised by the development within the child of a vivid life of imagination. Children in this period live strongly in a world of pictures – pictures which are presented to them and pictures which they form themselves. In this phase, if supported to do so, children naturally think poetically, in imagery – their

thinking is a “feeling” thinking rather than the later analytical abstract thinking. They are capable of inspired insights. If they are allowed the time and the space to live into the pictures and experiences presented to them, they will carry with them into adult life, vivid and strong powers of imagination.

The life of feeling predominates at this time and a sense for beauty. As the child moves through this phase, the faculty for more conscious and consecutive thought emerges but the pictorial world of the imagination remains the child's most vital asset. The healthy feeling life of the child is supported by providing a context of beauty for all things, from simple movements to complex ideas.

### ***How we can support them***

*The child needs to use active feelings to connect to learning as a process. It is at this time that children are ready for academic instruction, as long as it continues to appeal to social and physical realms and, even more so, the realm of feeling*

*The small child grew by imitating; the school-aged child now wants to imitate. A hero or an idol, someone from real life or from visual stories provide the child with a guideline for the development of its conscience. Where the inspiring image touches the child's soul, an impulse can arise for a richly developing emotional life. The child forms its own preferences, develops standards and values and wants to place itself in the world by doing good. By giving children the opportunity to express themselves (through art, music, sport, drama etc), the child learns to understand themselves. When this is in harmony, the child blossoms into a world of inner beauty.*

**14-21: Thinking** By the time they reach high school, children/young adults are ready to work with their thoughts and beliefs. They are ready to think critically and evaluate the world around them. Where they first learned to manage their will and then work with their feelings, they now learn to work with their thoughts.



In this phase, the adolescent builds a bridge between how they let themselves be led as a child, and how the young adult leads themselves. That bridge is puberty. It is characterised by a wish to make one's life one's own.

The adolescent begins to discover him/herself in the world of ideas. Ideas are to be enjoyed, explored, and argued. A personal search for truth emerges as does a new questioning – of themselves, society, parents, teachers, values, meaning of life and others. This phase can be characterised by a life of thinking – crucial for the cultivation of good judgement and clarity of thought.

Associated with this comes a healthy and valuable idealism which, if not nurtured, can quickly descend into cynicism and combined with the extreme sensitivity of this age-group, can make for great vulnerability. Young people at this time are looking for role models and need to be surrounded by positive, compassionate adults who hold up a mirror showing all that a human being can become and can achieve.

### ***How we can support them***

*To support this phase, a gradual transition from giving limits to giving freedom is required from parents. Good conversations about the why of something, about successful or less successful freedoms are necessary to keep the bond with our children warm. But conflicts are also important for young people to learn how to formulate their own opinions. What do I want? What do I think? Why do I want this? It's up to us to be authentic, to look at the world with positivity and interest, to remain adults in discussions and to listen well. It is precisely our strong Ego that is needed, so that young people can mirror our values, our convictions and our way of thinking. And from time to time, humour is an excellent counsellor in adolescent heights. Humour makes us put things into perspective and sometimes creates a new opening in stalled drama.*

The above phases reflect the way children, in particular age groups, relate to the world. These phases are certainly not static and have many external influences which will impact on the emergence of each phase in an individual. Whilst the primary forces of thinking, feeling and willing emerge more strongly at different phases all three continue to develop throughout childhood