

Partnership with parents in Steiner Waldorf settings

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Steiner Waldorf settings in the UK today take many different forms, including Parent and Toddler groups, home childcare settings and Kindergartens. Parents often comment that they have chosen a Steiner Waldorf setting for their child due to the sense of community that practitioners have carefully fostered. Working together with families to support the child has been at the heart of the Steiner Waldorf approach since its beginning over 100 years ago. Steiner Waldorf practitioners work out of 3 prime responsibilities:

- **An attitude of gratitude** - to each family for choosing this setting
- **Professional love** - in our relationships with all children and families
- **A sense of duty** - taking our commitment to every member of the community seriously

Many Steiner Waldorf schools and Kindergartens offer parent and toddler/baby groups, to support families right from the start. Dorothy Marlen in York has developed 'Gentle Beginnings' parent and baby groups (6 weeks to 18 months) informed by Steiner Waldorf principles but also informed by the approach developed by the Pikler Institute in Budapest. She explains the role of the group:

'This approach enables me to work closely with parents to support a co-operative and reciprocal relationship between them and their baby right from the start. The first 18 months are the most critical period for natural motor development, which is the foundation for all later learning. The small, calm groups (7 families maximum) give parents the opportunity to experience how to slow down and simplify, supporting each other.'

These groups provide much needed time and space for babies to play and explore and for parents to observe their baby's natural motor development.

St Michaels School, London, run regular vibrant parent and toddler groups. They value the fact that this enables the families to develop relationships with each other. Regular attendance also enables parents and children to get to know practitioners and helps establish a trusting relationship. Silvia Lauzzana, a practitioner at the school describes the unique nature of this way of working with families:

'It is 'special' because we get to work with very young children and their attentive and often new parents. It is 'delicate' because we can directly observe dynamics between parents and their own children, and, as a result, can respond sensibly and without judgement. Often, we are 'quiet' observers working out of the Steiner early childhood principles of rhythm, routine and role modelling.'

Over time practitioners can introduce parents and children to new crafts and activities, using natural materials, lead families from one activity to the next through singing, create puppet shows, tell stories, support children in their play and intervene to support them in resolving their conflicts. Parents often discuss the importance of these groups, explaining that they find inspiration and ideas from these initiatives that they can bring into their home lives in their own way.

Suzie Gibbs, a childminder in Elmfield, reflects on the importance of home visits:

'I offer every family a home visit, it is so important to visit the child in their own home or garden. This generally takes place after the child has visited my home based setting several times as part of the settling in period and before they stay at my home without their parent. The home visit helps the children to form a secondary attachment to me and from my experience, helps the children to settle at my home.'

Although time consuming, home visits are a valuable opportunity for practitioners to get to know each family and to show respect for and interest in the culture of their home life. These connections with families live on in the setting often supporting relationships with parents over many years with subsequent children.

When children enter the Kindergarten (3-6 years) at St Michaels School, the practitioners aim to work closely and actively with parents to create a nurturing environment for the children and the community they aim to serve. The process of transition to the Kindergarten is carefully worked out with each family, then throughout the child's time in Kindergarten regular meetings and opportunities for discussion are valued by practitioners and parents. Silvia Lauzzana explains the approach in St Michaels School:

'As in any Early Childhood Setting partnerships are formed and develop when the practitioner has a professional attitude, is open and warm, and when information is communicated clearly. Practitioners know that home is the most important place in the young child's life.'

Each term a parents evening is organised in the Kindergarten which brings everyone together as a group. Orsi Antal from Lindens Kindergarten in Stroud explains how they organise these evenings in their setting:

'Parents come together and have the opportunity to hear about what has been organised for the children that term and perhaps try out an activity, such as painting or singing, as well as discussing their own perspectives and observations.'

This is not a time for discussing individual children but for supporting each other and coming together to develop our understanding of young children's holistic development.

Orsi also values the opportunity that is provided by community celebrations:

'Parents and families are also invited into the kindergarten for some of the festivals that we celebrate. These events are valuable in welcoming parents and/or carers into the setting and provide a strong connection between home and the setting for the children. It is a wonderful experience for children to see their parents in the setting and to experience how adults work together and mark special times of the year.'

Consciously working out of the three responsibilities of gratitude, professional love, and a willingness to do our duty entails an openness to working with all families and to continue to adapt to the needs of parents and children in the rapidly changing circumstances of life in the UK. This does not mean it is always easy but that there is a continued commitment to strive to develop an empathetic attitude to all parents and to be willing to listen to their concerns, needs, hopes, and joys.