

Waldorf Moments

I'm always interested in learning how other parents find their way to a Waldorf school such as Ashwood. Certainly my husband and I had never heard of Waldorf education when we were growing up. It wasn't until a few chance conversations with friends about seven years ago (when our child was three) that we heard about Ashwood, and thought to find out more.

The next question that I always want to ask parents of Waldorf students is "So what do you think of this Waldorf thing?" In other words: "How has the Waldorf curriculum 'worked' for your children?" and "What inspires you to keep choosing Waldorf education as your children grow?"

I do not actually go around quizzing parents this way, but I did recently put out a query inviting Ashwood parents to send me their written comments for use in this article. In addition to the written responses, I also enjoyed some candid verbal comments. One very enthusiastic response came from a woman who had just finished substitute-teaching for a week in the grades 7/8 class. It was Friday afternoon and she was eight months pregnant, but she did not appear at all worn-out. Instead she talked energetically about the maturity of the students, their kindness toward children in the younger classes, and their intellectual readiness to take on new challenges.

A mother of a first-grader and a Kindergartener shared similar impressions. "One significant reason we have made the challenge of paying for a Waldorf education a priority, is the immense emphasis on the value of interpersonal relationships, from the parent/child program onward. The children (and the parents) are presented with model interactions demonstrating kindness, respect, and empathy.... In today's world of competition and the race to achieve everything at an inhuman pace, this aspect of Waldorf education teaches us all how to be more human. As I have seen through observation of the older children in the grade school, the incredible academic achievements will come."

How interesting, now, to be able to leap ahead to the words of a mother of an eighth grader: "I see that what I questioned in the earlier grades, I understand and appreciate now [that my daughter is] in eighth grade. My questions were: 'Why do they have to use those big clumsy crayons in first grade?' And 'Why does everybody have to make the same picture, just so, with only certain colors?' Things that seemed so rigid and so governed and predictable in the younger years.. .all make sense now!

She continues: "Now in our last year of grade school here at Ashwood, I can say I adore the education! I admire what they're doing, the things they produce, from drawings to writings to clay modeling, to handwork, to class plays, to how they interact and respect each other AND their fellow schoolmates outside at recess. They can be together and they can be separate too, be their own selves in all their originalities. They're quite a diverse group! I admire each one of them: their uprightness and their

ways with adults. Although they're now starting to rebel and question, they can still meet your gaze and shake hands and hold a conversation with adults. The main lesson books are proof of how this all works, as are also just seeing them in action. They have been taught respect for themselves, for their classmates, and for Nature and the world around them--which in this day and age is amazing."

A father of three boys shared a similar overview of his children's education at Ashwood. (This excerpt comes from his writings of a few years ago, when his children were in nursery, first grade, and third grade.) "This [school] is a place where children are given appropriate tasks in a context that leads to a deep understanding, slowly ripening. I know that my three boys will finish Ashwood having experienced their learning profoundly. And this is a learning that goes beyond just intellect. As the third grader practices holding his violin bow, and as the first grader's form drawing and painting lead into letters, and as the nursery student gives his teacher the fresh carrot he brought for the soup he'll help to make that morning, I see them building compassion, creativity, and courage: qualities they will need to live their lives in ways that serve humanity."

A mother of a fifth grade boy shared this account of a birthday party two years ago: "The children ran with joy through a treasure hunt, then played a lively game of Freeze Tag. I had prepared a project for each of them to paint, and then sew, a little tepee. There, spread out on our screened porch, was a group of Ashwood classmates--all boys--diligently threading needles and sewing up the tepees they had painted, with a seamless ability to transfer from vigorous activity to careful concentration."

The father of a fourth grade girl has been similarly impressed by students' ability to concentrate on a task at hand. The example he chose to describe to me took place when he was volunteering in a third grade classroom. The teacher had set the students to work on a new carpentry project: first studying building-plans, then measuring, sawing, and nailing together wooden birdhouses and flower-boxes. Granted, the students were well-prepared from previous lessons. Yet this father was still amazed to observe 16 students working independently (with no further instructions from the teacher) for an uninterrupted 30 minutes.

The father of three boys continues: "I believe that the Ashwood Waldorf School offers something that most schools don't: a heart. At other schools, our children might learn the alphabet earlier, or become tiny computer wizzes, or have fun on a school bus. But at Ashwood, there's room to let go of the race into adulthood. We don't have to pretend our children are just little grownups, and we don't have to fear that they won't be able to 'compete.'"

Speaking of competition, I also had an interesting conversation with the father of a boy who is very capable at math. At a different school, the father imagined, his son might be placed in an advanced math class and encouraged to move ahead in the curriculum more quickly. However, the father feels no need for his son to be "specializing" in math at this point. He believes it's more important that the rest of the

curriculum be as rich as possible; this is where he sees his son challenged and engaged. The family appreciates the balance that this provides in their child's education, and life as a whole.

A mother of two young students--a girl and a boy--reports "Hearing on the grapevine that Universities actually seek out Waldorf -educated children, as they tend to 'think outside the box'. In the past I have thought perhaps this was just wishful thinking on the part of us Waldorf parents, but then my husband tells me that corporations are now looking for people with MFA's as opposed to MBA's because they too tend to think outside the box."

No matter what educational approach a parent chooses, evidently one of the greatest potential rewards is seeing one's child enthusiastically embrace learning, and love being a part of a learning community:

From a mother of a 1st grader: "[I remember] listening in on my daughter's class one day when delivering snow boots in the hallway outside the school room. I heard all the class having such fun learning to count using a jump rope with their teacher, all giggling and laughing out loud as they were learning. That makes me happy.... My daughter absolutely loves going to school, even just the thought of it. "

Parents of a 2nd grader and a 5th grader: "For six years now, both of our children run, skip, and jump out of the car to join their classes!"

Mother of an eighth grader: "As to staying home from school, she never wants to! 'Oh Mom," [my daughter says if I suggest she may need to stay home one day], I *have* to go to school.' She *wants* to *be there* even now at age thirteen."

-- written and compiled by Mariana Tupper
