

The Waldorf Approach to Early Childhood—Year by Year

Your child will grow and change more in the first seven years than in any other period of life. Early childhood is like spring, burgeoning with growth forces and overflowing with fresh beauty. While the first few months may seem to pass slowly, soon parents are running after their little ones, both literally and metaphorically. As soon as we think we have a handle on what is happening with our child, everything seems to change and we find ourselves full of questions again. These year-by-year descriptions are based on the Waldorf approach to child development and can perhaps be helpful to new parents.



Waldorf education is based on the understanding of child and adolescent development unfolding in three distinct seven-year cycles, from birth to 7 years of age, from 7 to 14, and from 14 to 21. These descriptions summarize the typical developmental achievements and challenges in each year of the first seven-year cycle. Each article also offers developmental perspectives and possible ways that parents and teachers can support a child as he or she progresses along the path from infancy to school readiness.

In each seven-year period, one of our human soul capacities comes to the fore. It should not be a surprise to the parents of young children that willing is the predominant capacity from birth to seven. Feeling predominates in the second seven-year cycle and thinking in the third. However, in each seven-year cycle, all of the three soul capacities are maturing, even though one is of primary importance.

That is why Waldorf educators often divide each seven-year cycle approximately into thirds. So, while the first seven years as a whole is understood as the Will period, we characterize the first third (from birth to 2 1/3) as the Willing-Willing phase, the second third (from 2 1/3 to 4 2/3) as the Feeling-Willing phase, and the last third (from 4 2/3 to 7) as the Thinking-Willing phase. This will make immediate sense to parents whose children have already passed from an earlier stage of early childhood to a later one. For new parents, this will make sense as you accompany your child through the first seven years.

In this way, the first seven-year cycle lays the foundation for the further developments in the following two seven-year cycles. Being aware of these phases helps us to better understand the

shifts in consciousness that occur in early childhood and how we can support our children in integrating the changes they are experiencing.

The suggestions in each article often apply to more than one specific year, and may be referred to, but are not repeated, in every instance. At the end of each article there are also excerpts from WECAN publications and suggestions for further reading. There are many Waldorf resources that describe the seven-year cycles in greater detail for readers who want to learn more about the Waldorf approach beyond early childhood.



Parenting is a process of development in itself. Each year with a child helps us to see how we need to grow and change, but each year also has an abundance of moments that make us smile, laugh, and celebrate together!