

First Grade Readiness

Joan Almon

What does it mean when we say that a child shows the signs of first grade readiness, or as the Germans so wisely say, that a child is *schulreif* (ripe for school)? There are many changes in the child's physical, emotional, social and mental life that one looks for, which can be listed and observed in a fairly objective manner. But there is also a *qualitative* difference that is more difficult to describe, yet very important to sense. The good gardener knows from one day to the next when a piece of fruit is ripe for picking, and when this process is translated into childhood, it relates to Rudolf Steiner's statement that a whole new aspect of the individuality is born around the age of six or seven. This new birth is not as physical and clear-cut as the physical birth of the child, but it is an important time in the growth of the child. It is the underlying reality for the many changes that are visible around ages six to seven.

To understand how such a birth can be part of the ongoing life of the child requires an image of human development that goes beyond linear growth and includes the image of transformative growth. Linear growth takes place along a continuum, and one can think of the line of growth as going on a steady incline upwards. Thus, one sees the child growing before one's eyes and can plot the line of growth by measuring height and weight, for instance. Transformative growth,

however, takes linear growth into account but goes a step further. It indicates that at certain critical points in an individual's development, a transformation takes place analogous to the caterpillar spinning a cocoon and emerging as quite a new creature, a butterfly. There are points in life when we enter a cocoon-like womb, go through many changes and emerge with a new form. Now we can fly in areas where before we could only crawl. One of these transformative stages of growth takes place at around age seven. At this time, Steiner describes the birth of a new body, which he calls the life body or etheric body. He goes on to describe two more periods of birth in the growing individual. The next is around age fourteen when the body of feelings, called the astral body, is born. And then, at around age twenty-one, the Ego or individuality comes to birth. All of these are present in the human being from the embryological stage, but they are in protective sheaths in which they grow like the embryo in the womb until their time of birth is at hand.

The etheric body, which is born at around age seven, parallels our physical body in many ways, but it is much subtler in nature. It is not visible to most human beings, but nevertheless plays a vital role in keeping the physical body alive and healthy. When the etheric body is weakened, as it so often is in modern human beings, we expe-

rience it as a weakening of the protective sheath which normally prevents illness from taking hold in the physical body. In this function, it bears a close relationship to the immune system.

With this background in mind, it is easier to understand school readiness, for after the birth of the etheric, the child is quite different than she was before. She is ready to fly in new areas, or, better said, she stands upon the earth in a new way. She seems so ready to *receive* knowledge from a figure of loving authority, whereas before she took in life through imitation. She offered her love to parents and to teachers and wanted to imitate them in all that they did and all that they felt, but she did not look to them for knowledge in the way she now does. One sees that she has developed new *capacities* needed for learning and absorbing knowledge. In her feeling life and in her rhythmic system she shows new capacities, as well, and seeks out friends with whom she can have deeper, more long-lasting relationships. Imagination is born in her and wants to be fed with stories and pictures. Physically, too, many changes have occurred, and in the child's movements, one sees a penetration into hands and feet that was not there before. The unique individuality of the child is still clearly recognized, but the body in which it is housed has gone through considerable change. In my experience, one usually sees these changes taking place over a period of about one year. It is a gradual process, but there comes a time when one looks at the child and senses that something really new has happened.

In a lecture on first grade readiness given at a conference in Lexington, Massachusetts, Dr. Gerald Karnow of Spring Valley, NY spoke of the etheric body in relation to the phantom limb experience of the amputee. Often after a limb has been amputated, the individual still "feels" the limb as if it were there. This is called the phantom limb. Unlike the physical limb, however, the phantom limb has some unusual characteristics. Amputees describe how they can contract the

limb and make it very small or enlarge it. They can project it through walls, for it knows no physical barriers such as physical limbs know. Dr. Karnow reported that patients with leprosy describe the differences between limbs which had to be amputated because of infection and those which had atrophied and needed to be removed. They described the latter as having *died* and reported no phantom limb phenomena with those, suggesting that the life body of the limb had died along with the limb. An example was also given of a child whose phantom limb was "born" around age six. She had lost an arm as a young child and had no experience of a phantom limb until around age six when she "grew" one. She spoke of how she could now use it for counting on her fingers.

The implication of these examples is that the etheric body is a real body, only not a densely physical one. It has its own nature and experience, its own birth and death. Rudolf Steiner speaks of the birth of the etheric as a necessary step before the child is introduced to academic subjects, for it is only with the birth of the etheric that memory is freed and the capacity for imagination is born. Both of these are needed for creative, healthy learning, and we will describe this process in more detail. Premature exposure to academic studies places a great strain on young children, as is finally being recognized by American educators and parents. Five-year-olds tend to be quite awake mentally, so it can seem that they are ready for some academic instruction. However, long-term studies indicate that they will not do as well in academic work or in other areas of life as those children who have been allowed to engage in healthy creative play until first grade readiness is established.

One such study was done in Germany in the mid-1970s. At that time, the thrust for early academics in the state kindergartens was in full swing, and most kindergartens in Germany had switched to being academic-oriented. Fortunately some German professors decided to study the

results of such programs while there were still play-oriented kindergartens left for comparison. A study was done of fifty kindergarten classes that were play-oriented and fifty that were academic-oriented. Thus, about one thousand children from each type of kindergarten were studied. Their progress was followed through fourth grade, and it was found that the children from the play-oriented kindergartens excelled over the children from the academic-oriented kindergartens in every area studied—in physical development, emotional and social development, as well as in mental development. The results of the study were so impressive that the German kindergartens switched back to being play-oriented. (*Der Spiegel*, 1977, #20, pp. 89-90.) Unfortunately, a comparable large scale study was never done in North America, and early academics continued for nearly twenty years until the obvious stress in the children and their failure to succeed over the long-run convinced educators that academic kindergartens were a mistake. Although most American educators are now convinced that play-oriented kindergartens are very important for children, the prevalence of academics in the public kindergartens continues, for it takes many years for new ideas to filter down into the classrooms and drive the old practices out.

James Uphoff and June Gilmore have reported on other studies that indicate the difficulty of children starting school too soon. They used age cut-off as their criteria and found that “summer birthday” children who started kindergarten under the age of five years three months or first grade under six years three months tended to have greater difficulties than the older children in the classes. The problems manifested in a number of areas. The younger children tended not to do as well in their grades or on their scores on standardized tests. They tended to repeat a grade more often than did the older children, and they showed signs of learning disabilities more frequently. The academic problems of the younger children often lasted right into adoles-

cence and even into adulthood. The most disturbing part of the article by Uphoff and Gilmore was a report on a pilot study that they did on adolescents and young adults who committed suicide in their county in one year. Looking back at their schooling patterns, they found that a disproportionate number of them had started first grade under six years three months. This was especially true of the girls who had committed suicide, leading one to wonder if the boys found more ways to act out their frustrations in school, whereas the girls were more apt to bottle it up inside. At any rate, the findings of Uphoff and Gilmore lend a serious weight to considerations of first grade readiness. This is not simply an academic question of when a child should begin first grade, but is a decision that strongly influences the life of the youngster during the school years and beyond.

A few examples may help flesh out these findings. During a discussion about first grade readiness, a kindergarten teacher spoke of her own son who had started first grade long before she and her husband knew of Waldorf education. For the first few months of school, he came home each day in tears, obviously exhausted by the experience. His parents were unsure of what to do, but gradually he seemed better able to cope, and from second grade on, he seemed to be doing all right. Once the son was in twelfth grade, his father remarked one day that he must be happy to be graduating and going to college. Quite spontaneously, the young man answered, “No, I wish I had another year of school.” The parents were stunned to realize that, although the boy had seemed to adjust to school, he had never felt completely at home with his placement there and should probably have waited another year before entering first grade. When we asked how the boy was doing now in adulthood, his mother went on to say that at age nineteen he was in a serious accident and nearly lost his life. Tragic as it was, it had the positive effect of helping him to find his rightful place within himself, and he seemed much better synchronized within

himself after the accident. David Elkind, in his books, points out that children who have been hurried in life often need to take a year off after high school to catch up with themselves. This is one way to help overcome the stresses of too much academics too soon in life. But, Elkind points out that some of those who have been “mis-educated” have experienced stress at such a deep level that additional help is needed. In Waldorf education, we see that one source of this help is through artistic outlets or curative eurythmy. The arts, when presented in a healthy, living manner, help to promote healing.

Another example illustrates the relationship between readiness and learning disabilities. It involves a little girl who had been a borderline case as far as readiness was concerned. Both her teacher and her parents were undecided if she was ready for first grade, but at last decided she was and sent her on to a Waldorf first grade. She soon showed signs of difficulty and could not keep up with her class. Whereas some children might have acted out and misbehaved in these circumstances, her response was to become excessively dreamy. By winter, she seemed so unfocused in her work that her teacher grew concerned that the child had a learning problem and recommended testing. The testing service diagnosed serious learning disabilities and recommended she attend a special school for learning disabled children. They did not feel a Waldorf school could meet her needs, even with tutoring. They also recommended a quieter, more rhythmic lifestyle for the child, and in order to provide this, the parents decided to move to a smaller town with a Waldorf school for their younger child and a special school for their older child. Meanwhile, as she was gaining so little from her first grade experience, she returned to the kindergarten for the spring term and happily played for a few months. In the summer, the family moved and after much debate as to what would be best, decided to try the child again in the Waldorf school before enrolling her in the special school. They placed her in first grade again

to see whether she could possibly manage. It was soon apparent that the child showed no signs of learning disability at all. She mastered the first grade curriculum with ease and continued as an attentive, active student who is now in the fifth grade. Her only “learning problem” was that she had been placed in a first grade too soon.

It is painful to think of all the children who have unnecessarily suffered academically or personally simply because adults made poor judgments regarding their schooling. This has been a problem for some of the children in our Waldorf schools who entered first grade too soon, and it is not too late to help these children. By repeating a grade, they can sometimes be placed in the right situation. When parents and adults carry the responsibility for the “mistaken placement,” the burden is removed from the child who need not feel any sense of failure. While not every child with school difficulties needs this solution, it is worth considering in some instances.

Serious as misplacement can be in a Waldorf school, these children were at least not being asked to do academic work before first grade. When one considers all of the American public school children who have been asked to do first grade work while in kindergarten during the past twenty years, one feels deep concern for the problems these children may suffer in their lifetimes. Already one hears of much greater stress among preschoolers, of burn-out among elementary children, and of high school students who seem unable to think creatively. In addition, many problems of adolescence have increased radically during the past twenty years, such as drug and alcohol use, teen pregnancies, teenage suicide, eating disorders and other forms of mental diseases. It is easy to imagine that unreasonable demands in schooling at young ages lead to stress which continues to escalate throughout the school years, leading to serious problems in adolescence, that most vulnerable of times. Of course, other problems such as family disturbances and excessive exposure to media

also contribute to childhood stress, but the one area which the schools can more or less control is their own curriculum, and that is where immediate change is needed.

While contemporary research points out the difficulties of introducing academic work too soon to children, other research, such as that done by Sara Smilansky, shows the positive gains in academic and social areas among children who are strong in creative, fantasy play in their kindergarten years. One hopes that a more enlightened attitude will prevail in America and other countries in the coming years and that parents and educators will insist on academics being removed from the kindergarten and put back in the first grade where they belong. This "push down" of curriculum took place after the Sputnik scare of the 1950's. Now that the Cold War is over, surely this vestige of it in American education can be removed. If a healthy division between kindergarten and elementary education can be reinstated, focus can then turn to the fundamental question of when is a child ready to enter elementary school. What are the signs of first grade readiness?

In the physical realm, as in other realms, one sees many signs of change. Generally, there is a kindergarten "look" in contrast to a first grade "look," and this look has much to do with body proportion, for the limbs now stretch in relation to the body and head. There is also a loss of baby fat, and greater definition occurs in the face, which usually accompanies the loss of baby teeth. As the six-year-old molars come in, as well as the permanent teeth in the front, the jaw begins to grow to make more room for the molars and the second teeth. At this time, the chin becomes more pronounced, and the face takes on a more "down to earth" look. All in all, one sees less of a dreamy kindergartner and more of a focused first grader. One cannot see the changes as clearly in children who have thinned down at an earlier age and whose faces look "old" even in kindergarten, as one can in children with

the classic round look of the kindergarten child. However, even in the thin, wiry child close observation will show some changes.

Sometimes one sees a child in first grade who still has the classic look of a kindergarten child. It is well worth considering if this child has been misplaced. In one school, I was asked to observe a first grade where the teacher thought that one or two children belonged in the kindergarten. Simple observation showed that there were two girls who still had the "look" of kindergarten children. After further study of them, it was decided that one girl was well placed, but that the other should return to the kindergarten. Even though she was able to keep up with her class, it was noted that she could do so only by pushing herself to a great extent, and it was felt that this would take its toll over time. Another aspect of her development could be seen in her drawings. Her people and houses were well formed and looked like first grade ready pictures, but the people were not yet standing on the earth. Rather, they hovered in the air, about an inch above the grass line. We shall speak of children's drawings further on. The child's parents were concerned that she might feel she had "failed" first grade, but when she was told she would return to the kindergarten, her immediate response was, "Oh good, can I go back for Advent?" She reentered the kindergarten happily and is now in sixth grade and doing very well.

In the emotional realm, one feels how the emotional or soul life of the child is developing. While young children often show strong emotions, their emotional outbursts are like squalls that arise quickly and pass quickly. One moment the child expresses tremendous anger, saying how much he hates the adult and wishes he was dead, and in the next moment all is forgotten and the child is happily at play. Regrettably, adults tend to take such outbursts rather seriously and attribute more meaning to them than they should. Young children have strong feelings, but on a rather surface level. As the child

approaches first grade readiness, however, the feelings begin to deepen. Now children complain of “hurt feelings” and will sit sadly for a while nursing these bruised feelings. In general, it is as if a hidden chamber has been found, where the feeling life dwells. These feelings of all kinds live, and these feelings have longer life and more depth than those of the younger child. The children sense that this chamber is a hidden room and more private, and a hidden side of the child begins to manifest. They love secrets and frequently will whisper them to one another. They like to play tricks and be sly and cunning in their behavior. They also become more aware of dreams and connect more fully with stories and artistic activities.

This new emotional life shows itself in social situations as well. The very young child engages in parallel play where he plays next to another child, but is not very involved with the child. The three- and four-year-olds play with “playmates” and engage actively with them during play situations, but tend not to think much about them otherwise. A common exception to this is with children whose families are close friends or where the children carpool together. Sometimes, too, what looks like an early friendship is simply a dependent relationship formed because a child is shy and needs a cohort for strength. Generally, however, three- and four-year-old children who find one another in the kindergarten have a lighter, short-term relationship with each other that we can call the playmate stage. The child getting ready for first grade, however, begins to form friendships that go deeper than these earlier stages. A friend is someone you think about even when you’re not with the person. You care about them and feel loyalty towards them. Children at this stage begin exploring friendship. They love to invite children over or be invited to the homes of others. Parents joke that they need to keep social calendars for their children at this stage. Usually, one needs to establish some healthy limits on socializing of outside school, for, if left to the child, she may want to get to-

gether with other children four or five afternoons a week plus weekends. Such a busy social life would wear her out, to say nothing of her poor parents who have to chauffeur her about.

In the *mental realm*, several very important changes take place. One is the birth of memory, that Rudolf Steiner often refers to in relationship to the birth of the etheric body. This can be a confusing point, for parents are often amazed at how strong the memory of a young child can be. It is different, however, from the “freed” memory of the school child. The difference can be described in this way. If you ask a four-year-old if he remembers Grandma’s birthday last year, he will probably look quite blank. But if you are baking a cake for the birthday party, and it is the same cake you baked last year, the sight of it may trigger the child’s memory, and he will tell you about the party in remarkable detail. Or you may ask this child what he did in school and receive as the answer, “Nothing, we just played.” While you’re cooking dinner, one of the foods may trigger his memory of kindergarten snack, and suddenly you’ll hear all about the kindergarten morning. Or you may ask what songs were sung at circle time and receive a perplexed look from the young child. Later, while he’s at play, a melody goes through his mind, and suddenly he is singing and reciting the whole of the morning circle. Memory exists in the young child, but the child does not have free access to it. It takes something from the outside such as a sight or smell or a rhythmic verse from within to trigger memory that then comes pouring out in rich detail.

When memory is freed at around age six or seven, however, the child can freely enter in and find the memory he is looking for. The process reminds me of going into a large library and finding just the book one is searching for. A nine-year-old demonstrated this search to me when I saw him in a supermarket one day and asked if he remembered Acorn Hill, the Waldorf kindergarten he had attended. He clapped his hand on his fore-

head, closed his eyes and had a look of extreme concentration. After a minute or two, his brow cleared and he described a birthday celebration and an eurythmy class at Acorn Hill. He apologized for taking so long to remember his kindergarten but explained in great seriousness that he had gone to two public schools since then. I had a strong impression of his going into the library of his mind and going past the first shelves which contained his most recent school memories, past the next shelves which held his last school, and finally arriving at the Acorn Hill shelves.

Another aspect of mental change is in the realm of *imagination*, which is different from the *fantasy* of the kindergarten child. A characteristic of fantasy play is that the child needs props to carry out the play. It can be the very simplest of props such as children use in the Waldorf kindergarten, such as using corn cobs or small logs for baby bottles or stones and nuts for food, but it is hard for the four-year-old to feed her “baby” without some sort of prop at hand. When imagination is born, however, one often sees children play without objects. They can now “see” their play situation in their mind’s eye and do not need the physical toys. I recall as a school child playing ongoing “soap operas” where we used no props at all, but the characters were fully alive in our minds. Bronja Zahlingen, a much-loved Waldorf kindergarten teacher from Vienna, describes her transition to imaginative play from fantasy play in this way: As a child she loved to play with small objects—people, houses, animals, etc.—on a deep window seat in her bedroom. She would create a scene and play with it by the hour. One day, when she had turned six, she set up a scene, as usual, but then closed her eyes and played the whole scene out in her mind. This is the birth of imagination. Sometimes a child will voice this change by saying something like, “I can see Grandpa whenever I want. I just have to close my eyes.” On a subtler level, one also sees this change to imagination at story time in the kindergarten. The younger children will usually listen to a fairy tale with their mouths

open, literally drinking in the tale, tasting the sounds and feeling the rhythm of the words. The six-year-olds will often close their mouths while listening, and one can almost see the images of the story flow across their foreheads. They are clearly living into the tales in a whole new way. This aspect, coupled with the newly born memory forces, allows the school-ready children to go home and repeat in great detail the stories they heard in the kindergarten.

When teaching academics, these qualities of free memory and imagination are all important. The Waldorf first grade teacher may begin with props such as counting stones and stories about the shepherd who loses some of his sheep, but she expects the children to be able to remember what they learned yesterday and be able to add new information to the picture day after day. They need to picture their lessons inwardly and pull them out of memory as they need them. All academic learning requires these capacities, but if they are not born yet, what is the child to do? The child struggles to compensate as much as possible. Some educators say that in compensating the children learn with the cortex or covering of the brain, rather than with the deeper parts of the brain where such learning should take place. Another suggestion is made by Jane Healy in her book, *Endangered Minds*, where she surveys current brain research and suggests that more advanced learning requires nerves which are encoated with a fatty substance called myelin, which serves as an insulator and transmitter of learning. The myelinization of the sheaths, as the process is called, takes place slowly, and is not completed until early adulthood. Its rate of progress places certain organic boundaries on what can be effectively learned at different times. She says, “The relatively fixed order of myelinization in different brain areas may provide a real biological basis for ‘readiness’ for certain types of learning.” (p.70) Jane Healy’s concern is that the quality of thinking is seriously deteriorating as a result of early learning, exposure to media and other factors.

Another aspect of the mental development of first grade ready children is that they usually become interested in language arts and mathematics. This can manifest in a number of ways. Children at this stage love to play with words, make rhymes, or change the words in the songs and verses which the teacher presents in the kindergarten, and the teacher needs to find some fun materials that keep their tongues busy. They are not quite ready for tongue twisters, but verses with humor such as "My Household" in the Grimms' collection, fill them with delight. They also love learning a little bit of a foreign language, and after learning a single song or verse, will proudly go home and announce that they can speak the language in question. This is a playful door opener for the Waldorf student who will begin studying foreign languages in first grade.

A challenging aspect of this time period is that the children become interested in written language and want to be able to write their names and an assortment of words such as *Mommy, Daddy, to, from, love* and other greetings which are added to the pictures they draw for family and friends. Most children I know master ten or fifteen such words during the time before first grade and feel satisfied that they can now "read and write." In other words, at this age a little bit goes a long way. Unfortunately, often parents and educators see this budding interest and take it to mean that the child is now ready for formal instruction in written language. I have rarely seen a child who, left to his own devices, was interested in learning written language for more than a few weeks at this stage. The same is true of mathematics. The children love to play mental arithmetic with one another and will set one another challenging tasks, but one sees little interest in wanting regular practice with mathematical processes. Rather, they are at the point of "playing" with numbers and letters, and as long as they set the pace they are quite happy with it all. Only a few children I have known have actually wanted more than this playful ap-

proach, and these children taught themselves to read even though neither their parents nor their teachers wanted them to read yet. This convinced me that when the desire is strong enough, the child will overcome all barriers and learn to read, but, unfortunately, in each case it was a child who already lagged behind in social skills, and one felt that reading was going to make socializing even more difficult. It is easy for such children to place books at the center of their lives rather than human relationships.

Another aspect of mathematical thinking that awakens in many children is a interest in "infinity." One hears elaborate kindergarten conversations about this elusive concept, and one which especially struck me was between two girls, one five and one six. The five-year-old announced proudly that infinity was 6,248. The six-year-old looked scornfully at her and said, "That's not what infinity means. Infinity means *keep going*." As a philosophy of life, it seemed admirable, and indeed during this period, the children become little philosophers. They often talk about God, creation and how the world works. Life interests them tremendously, and they are prepared to think about anything, be it cosmic or microscopic. They are far less interested in our answers than in their own, and usually are very happy if we respond to their questions by asking them what they think. They are almost always prepared to answer, and their answers are incredibly rich and full of insight.

The transition to first grade readiness is also marked by the child's leaving the world of *imitation*, which so characterizes early childhood, and entering the world of *authority*. The young child generally feels that anything the adult can do, she can do as well and is eager to participate. The school child looks at the adult as one who "knows," and views the adult as a loving authority who will dispense knowledge to the receptive child. When I assisted in a Waldorf kindergarten in Vienna, I remember a six-year-old boy who would follow me around in hopes that I would

“drop” an English word on him, which I frequently did. It was clear that he looked upon me as an authority and not merely one who was to be imitated. While the children go through this important transition from imitation to authority, they frequently travel through a no-man’s land where they have no sense of how to learn. They feel cut off from the learning process and express this state of being by saying, “I’m bored.” This period usually lasts for a month or two, until the new phase of learning is established. During this period, one can sometimes make suggestions for play, which the children usually reject, but then replace with their own ideas. Another approach is to give the child some practical work to do. This is quite satisfying to them, and they may remain with the work for an extended period or, from the work, become inspired with a new idea for play.

There was a time when children’s drawings served as a strong indicator of first grade readiness, and they still do for some children. The problem is that many children seem uncomfortable with the process of drawing and are not able to produce the archetypal pictures so closely related to the child’s own growth forces. As children grow more precociously awake, it is difficult for them to draw the traditional, archetypal pictures. They are replaced with pictures of cars, ships, cartoon figures, etc. In her book, *Understanding Children’s Drawings*, Michaela Strauss says:

A comparison of the drawings that originated before the last war with the most recent ones shows that, compared with nowadays, the children at that time drew their messages more clearly. The phenomena of child development have remained the same, but the child’s unconscious perception of the laws of development of his own being—which are mirrored in his drawings—appears to have become weaker. Should this fact be seen in connection with the nervousness and overstimulation of today? (p. 10)

For children who are in touch with the archetypal forms of drawing, the signs of readiness include drawings of people whose heads, bodies and limbs are in reasonable proportion and whose feet are standing on the earth. The houses usually have square bottoms and triangle roofs, generally with an upright chimney and often with smoke emerging from it. There is usually symmetry in the picture, so if a flower appears on one side of the house, another flower will be on the other side, indicating that an awareness of the body’s own symmetry has been born in the child.

An additional area of change in the school-ready children is a greater degree of sexual awareness. This is the age for “playing doctor,” and children show an interest in exploring one another’s bodies, especially the bodies of the opposite sex. Every parent and teacher needs to consider what message they want to impart—verbally and non-verbally—around this delicate area. Most of us do not want to impart a sense of guilt or shame around sexual exploration, but we do need to consider what the healthy boundaries are. In the kindergarten, nudity and sexual exploration in play seem inappropriate, even when they take place in play that is not sexually oriented such as when a six-year-old was “powdering” her baby by sprinkling earth and pebbles all over the four-year-old child’s bare bottom. In the home, too, parents need to be clear about these boundaries when their children are playing with other children.

When all of these characteristics of change are put together, including the awakening of sexual interest, the stretching of the limbs, the awakening of the social life and of mental capacity, one finds many similarities to the changes of a youngster going into puberty and adolescence. I remember once describing the signs of first grade readiness to a group of class teachers, and the seventh grade teacher was astounded and said, “This sounds just like my class!” We call this period from around age six “the first adoles-

cence,” and it carries with it the wonder of that time of change and growth, as well as some of the pitfalls. One characteristic of adolescence is that so many changes are happening at once that it is hard for the youngster to maintain balance. They can easily become extreme, either becoming social butterflies, for example, or hermits. The same is true of children going through this first adolescence. Some want social contact all the time, some become preoccupied with the opposite sex, and some want only mental activities. The art of guiding children through this stage is to help them blossom in all areas, so that no one area becomes too lopsided.

When all of the changes are thoughtfully considered, one usually feels strongly that a child is either ready for first grade or needs to wait another year. Sometimes, however, the situation is less clear, and in such cases, my rule of thumb has been that if I am not certain, it is better to let the child wait, simply because when a child is ready it is so evident. Occasionally, though, one also needs to consider the relationship of the child to his classmates who are going on to first grade, or the relationship of the child to the first grade teacher. There can be the rare exception where the child is not quite ready to go on, but life circumstances dictate that it is best for the child to move forward.

Many teachers from new Waldorf initiatives which do not have grades have asked about our experience at Acorn Hill, where a number of our children have gone out to public schools at the kindergarten or first grade level. Over the years, we have seen that our students do very well when entering at the first grade level and by Christmas time have usually caught up with their classmates who have been introduced to academic subjects in kindergarten or before. We have learned that most first grade teachers need to review what the children learned in kindergarten, for at this age a great deal is forgotten over the summer. Our children enter at first grade, learn from the review period and are so fresh

and ready to learn that they take in very quickly what it took the others much longer to learn at a younger age. This process was beautifully described by a five-year-old in my kindergarten who was preparing to enter a public school kindergarten the following fall. Her sister also had been with me and had left for public kindergarten, a process I do not recommend for reasons so aptly described by this child. She was playing with some friends and said in a very serious tone, “Public kindergarten is really hard. It’s *really* hard,” she repeated with much emphasis. The others began looking nervous as this was clearly not what they had been told by their parents. “Yes,” she went on, “it’s *really, really* hard. I know because my sister told me.” She paused, and in a much lighter tone added, “But first grade is easy, because you just do all the same things again!” The obvious question is: Why trouble children with academics at the kindergarten level, when it does not help and does hinder the long term learning processes?

As a practical point, when Waldorf children do need to enter non-Waldorf first grades, we have found it helpful to give a brief written description of our Waldorf kindergarten approach to the parent to pass on to the first grade teacher. We found that when the teacher realized the child had not yet been introduced to academics she viewed the child quite differently than if she assumed the child had been introduced to academics, but had retained very little. We also encouraged parents to be relaxed and supportive of the child as she went through the transition stage during the first few months of school. Children learn best if they feel this is a normal transition process and that they will soon catch on to what the teacher is asking of them. The quiet confidence of the parent is a great help.

To facilitate decisions about first grade readiness, school systems create age cut-offs. Waldorf schools also use birth dates, but generally as a guideline rather than as a strict rule. Traditionally, school systems in America used December

31 as their cut off so children under six were admitted to first grade. Many school systems have cut back to September 1 or October 1, and at least one now uses July 1. Waldorf schools have generally found that they need to cut further back than this, and many now use June 1, and a few use March 1. Classes now being formed in Waldorf schools are usually three to six months older than classes formed ten years ago, and we have heard from a number of class teachers taking a second or third class through how wonderful it is to have these older groups. They report that from the first day of school the children are ready to learn.

Questions of first grade readiness are major issues in countries that admit children into first grade at age six. In countries such as those in Scandinavia, which use age seven as the normal age for first grade, readiness is not a major issue, for nearly all seven-year-olds are ready. Where age six is used, however, the likelihood of unreadiness is so great, and the price paid by the child so enormous, that one needs to be well versed about first grade readiness in order to make the best decision for the child. Even when we consider all of changes described in this article, in the final analysis, it is knowing the child at the deepest levels that guides parents and teachers towards the right decision for that child. One hopes that the child's angel is whispering in our ear and that we are listening carefully.

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Joan Almon is co-chair of the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America, is the General Secretary of the Anthroposophical Society and is U.S. Coordinator of the Alliance for Childhood. Many of these ideas were presented in a lecture at the International Waldorf Teachers' Conference in Dornach, Switzerland, in April 1996.

Some Guidelines for First Grade Readiness

Nancy Foster

More and more often, it seems, the question of first grade readiness arises as a deep concern. The responsibility for making decisions or recommendations in this delicate area weighs heavily on many of us. As Waldorf teachers, we find that the longer we immerse ourselves in Rudolf Steiner's philosophy and the principles of Waldorf education, the better we will be able to reach wise decisions. This holds true in all aspects of our work, and earnest striving becomes an essential part of our lives.

In considering first grade readiness, we must place the child at the center of our thoughts. Guidelines for observation can be a great help, and those that follow, arranged in a somewhat rough-and-ready form, are offered in this light. No set of guidelines should be regarded as a sort of "score sheet:" if a child receives eight out of ten, "Yes, on to grade one!" On the contrary, nothing can replace the teacher's and the parents' knowledge of the individual child. It is a rare child who shows every characteristic of readiness at a given time; indeed, readiness is actually a process rather than a static point. This, of course, is where the elements of observation and experience enter in.

The parent-teacher discussion regarding readiness is an important event. In my experience, an effective approach has been first of all

to focus—teacher and parent together—on the child's needs rather than on a set of pre-conceived notions based on what "everyone else" is doing. The teacher's ability to share concrete, accurate observations of the child is a key factor here in gaining the parents' confidence. If the child's readiness is in question, it may be helpful to point out that results of a too-early placement in first grade may not show up for several years, and also that unready children do not "catch up" later on in grade school. It is useful to have some age guidelines in mind. For example, if June 1 is the cut-off date for entry into first grade, May birthdays should be looked at carefully, and in the case of boys (who generally lag about six months behind girls developmentally), even April birthdays may be questionable.

One question frequently raised by parents is that of intellectual readiness: "My child is so eager to learn letters and numbers. Shouldn't he go on to first grade?" Parents fear that if instruction does not begin, the child might be frustrated or the interest atrophy. A child, however, may show interest in letters and numbers quite early—even at age four or five—and may want to copy letters, or may ask how to spell words, etc. This interest may arise naturally out of imitation of the parents or older children. In itself, it is not necessarily a sign of intellectual readiness, and often dies away before reawakening when the

child is really ready for first grade. In any case, a child who is truly ready to read will learn to do so, one way or another, even without instruction. Intellectual and emotional readiness may develop at different rates, and intellectual readiness alone is not an adequate reason for placement in first grade.

In talking with parents of a child whose readiness is in doubt, it is useful if the teacher is able to describe what that particular child would gain from another year in kindergarten. Parents may wonder whether the year would simply be a repetition, and the teacher can explain that a child takes from an experience what she is ready for—that watercolor painting, for example, will be experienced very differently by a four-year-old and a six-year-old. It is especially important, however, that the parents be helped to feel confident that the teacher will not simply repeat the same activities and stories year after year, but that, instead, the program will be planned according to the needs of a particular group of children. The teacher will keep in mind the needs of the older, almost-ready-for-first-grade children, and make sure that they are offered experiences to challenge them and help them grow—still without pushing. The teacher can also help the parents consider their child’s readiness by asking them to picture the child in a first grade setting (always realizing, of course, that several months are yet to pass) and with the children who will be in the first grade group.

There is some risk in keeping a child in kindergarten too long, if the child has really reached the stage at which first grade activities are appropriate. Such a situation might arise, for example, in a school where there is not yet a first grade, and the parent wishes the child to remain in kindergarten one more year until a first grade is begun. Or it might arise if the teacher or parent is overly cautious. In this case, the needs of the child will not be met, and unhappiness or discipline problems may arise. It seems fairly clear, however, that there is more likelihood of error

on the side of too-early placement than too-late, and many teachers feel: “When in doubt—wait!” Particularly in today’s society, with its emphasis on acceleration in education, we must counteract the pressures to move children ahead too soon. There may also be a situation in which it must be determined whether a child needs another year of kindergarten even though he or she is chronologically ready, or whether there may be a developmental problem that needs to be addressed.

A teacher need not feel ashamed to be unsure about a child’s placement. It is best to be open with the parents, and to share with them those areas in question which they can observe for themselves. In this way the parents will feel comfortable about expressing their own questions openly and honestly, and a mutually helpful dialogue can take place. Parents will appreciate feeling that they have shared in the thinking process that leads to a recommendation.

Teachers and parents need to be clear about who it is that makes the final placement decision in questionable cases. Depending on the particular school, this will vary: Is it the faculty chairman? The College of Teachers? The incoming first grade teacher? The school doctor? The kindergarten teacher? The parents? It is a good idea to establish this clearly, as well as the procedures and timetable for reaching a decision. This will be especially helpful in cases when the kindergarten teacher and parents may not see eye-to-eye or there is a communication difficulty. Ideally, there will be mutual trust and confidence, but unfortunately this cannot always be the case, and then parents and teachers—like their children—need firm guidelines!

The following guidelines obviously are not to be brought to the attention of the children in question! They are based on information gained from various sources, including Margret Meyerkort, Elisabeth Moore-Haas, Bronja Zahlingen, and the Waldorf Institute (now Sunbridge Col-

lege), as well as my own and colleagues' observations. Since some of the information is "second-hand," and it has not been possible to check it all with its sources, teachers should be aware that there is the possibility of error or misinterpretation in spite of well-meant efforts to be accurate. In addition, this is certainly not presented as a complete, definitive list and, once again, it is not to be used as a checklist or score sheet, but rather as an aid to observation. For this reason, the guidelines include, in some parts, more than simply readiness characteristics, but also indicate preliminary stages, which may help give a broader perspective.

With these reservations and qualifications, the guidelines are offered in the hope that they will help kindergarten teachers to know their children better.

Physical Development

1. **Bodily proportions and characteristics:** Individual differences due to body type must be considered. In general, the head: body ratio changes from about 1:4 in infancy, to 1:6 at age seven, to 1:8 in the adult. These numbers mean that the head of the adult is 1/8 of the total body length, including the head. (See Lievegoed, *Phases of Childhood*.) Loss of baby fat and the "pot belly" should occur toward the end of the fifth year. The "first stretching" (growth of the legs) should occur toward the end of the sixth year. A school-ready child should have developed:
 - a. Ability to touch top of ear by reaching over top of head with opposite arm.
 - b. Waist and neck incisions in the trunk, indicating that the rhythmic system is maturing and becoming ready for first grade instruction
 - c. Visible joints (knuckles) and kneecaps instead of dimples
 - d. Arch in foot
 - e. Individualized facial features instead of baby

features (child who has not been able to undergo childhood illnesses may be hindered in this development)

- f. S-curve in spine
2. **Second dentition:** Usually a first-grade-ready child should have at least a loose tooth. If one or both parents, however, were slow in reaching second dentition, this factor should not be weighed as heavily for the particular child. The appearance of the 6-year molars is also a factor to be observed.
3. **Physical abilities:** The school-ready child should be able to do many or most of the following, as observed in spontaneous play (a child should not be "tested" on these items!):
 - a. Walk a beam, log, (or line) forward
 - b. Catch and throw a large ball
 - c. Hop on either foot
 - d. Bunny hop (both feet together)
 - e. Habitually walk in cross pattern (i.e. swing opposite arm when stepping out with one foot)
 - f. Climb stairs with alternating feet on each stair
 - g. Tie knots or, sometimes, bows; button; zip own clothing
 - h. Use fingers dexterously (sew, finger knit, play finger games, etc.)
 - i. Have established dominance (eye/hand dominance most important)—though this may in some cases not be firmly established until age nine
 - j. Not be unduly restless or lethargic
 - k. Shake hands with thumb separated from fingers, rather than offering the whole hand

Social and Emotional Development

1. The following stages can be observed in play:

- a. Age two–three: not really social; wants to possess and try out; reactive, transitory feelings
- b. Ages three–four: begins a bit to discover the “other,” but still self-centered; beginning of fantasy stage (transforms objects to meet own needs); activity for its own sake, not goal-oriented; or, transitory, quickly-changing goals (play with wood pieces may result in a house, which then becomes a campfire, etc., all without planning ahead)
- c. Age five: real need for social experience; beginning of give-and-take, sharing; some beginnings of planning in play
- d. School-ready child: develops feeling for others’ needs—social awareness, doing things for others; goal-oriented play—planning, thinking things out; does not need objects in play (can now “visualize” play rather than needing to collect many items as younger children did; this shows separation of concept/inner world from percept/outer world); begins more long-term friendships; play of horses and dogs (shows readiness for authority of first grade, obeying a “master”)

2. Other social/emotional abilities of the school-ready child:

- a. Ability to join in offered activities
- b. Ability to look after own eating, drinking, washing, toileting needs
- c. Ability to share teacher’s or parent’s attention and wait for a turn
- d. Ability to follow instructions and carry through with a task or activity
- e. Not be unduly dependent on a “security item” (thumb, blanket, etc.)
- f. Not be regularly the aggressor or victim; be accepted by most other children

Drawing and Painting (Don’t wait for all aspects to appear for any one child.)

1. Development of the will—shown in stages similar to those in play:

a. Activity for its own sake

Drawing: Child is involved in the movement, gesture of the activity. Spirals, zig-zags.

Painting: Process is paramount; stage of water, “mud,” and possible scratches from vigorous gesture.

b. Fantasy stage

Drawing: Child’s fantasy is caught up by the activity; child’s identification of an object in his drawing seems to arise out of the activity (“Oh, and here is a bear!” rather than “Now I’ll draw a bear.”)

Painting: unconscious, flowing beauty of colors.

c. School-ready child

Drawing: conscious goal in drawing picture.

Painting: Child becomes goal-conscious, attempts forms or “special effects” such as dots; paintings become stiffer, less beautiful for a time, but may then free up again later as child consciously discovers how to mix and blend colors and develops designs or forms appropriate to the medium; symmetrical designs, similar to crayon drawings, may appear.

2. Content of pictures (primarily in drawing):

- a. Evolution of human form: circle; then circle with eyes; then circle with appendages; then trunk is developed. Most mature form of trunk is triangular. Addition of fingers and other details.
- b. Change in emphasis from line (youngest children) to surface and color (older children want to color in objects, perhaps give people patterned clothing, etc.)

c. School-ready child:

1. Two-fold symmetry, indicating that the two-fold function of the brain has come about: symmetrical houses, often with a tree or flower on each side; or symmetrical designs in which the paper is divided into halves or quarters, often diagonally
2. Symmetrical color arrangements.
3. "Change-of-teeth" pictures, containing horizontal repetitions such as birds flying, rows of mountains, etc., reminiscent of rows of teeth.
4. Strip of sky and earth, showing child's awareness of "above and below" rather than the younger child's feeling of wholeness.
5. Use of the diagonal (related to brain development). Frequently seen in triangle form of roof or in drawing of stairs.
6. People and houses resting on grass at bottom of page.

Soul Life (Thinking, Feeling, Willing)

1. Signs of first grade readiness in the will:

- a. Conscious goals appear in play, drawing, painting, handwork; consciousness of self as creator results in awareness of the distinction between inner (desire) and outer (result). At "first puberty" this leads to the characteristic feelings of loneliness and inability (which may be expressed as "I'm bored"). This is an important stage, as it leads to the basis for natural respect which is to be found in the grade school years—the realization by the child that there are some things he can't yet do as well as the adult.
- b. Use of limbs is vigorous, active; the child likes to move furniture and heavy stumps, and use all available play cloths.
- c. The child likes to run errands (again, goal consciousness).

2. Signs of first grade readiness in the feeling life:

- a. Stormy period of first puberty proceeding to more calm; can handle feelings better; needs less adult intervention.
- b. Wrapping of objects as gifts (child "wraps himself around" the object).
- c. Loves humor, limericks, rhymes, play on words, silly words.
- d. May say verse faster than rest of group, or hold note longer at end of song (is beginning to grow aware in the realm of rhythm).
- e. Likes to whisper, have secrets (distinction between inner and outer).
- f. May like to tell of dreams (soul has made a step inward); awareness of inner and outer life. (Be careful this isn't imitation of adults or just telling a story; and don't question children about dreams.)

3. Signs of first grade readiness in the thinking/cognitive realm:

- a. Development of causal thinking ("if," "because," "therefore;" for example, "If I tie these strings together, they will reach that play stand," and also in the wish to tie things together with yarn, "tying" thoughts together in causal thinking).
- b. Correct use of verb tenses ("I stood," not "I stand.")
- c. Enjoys cunning, planning, and scheming.
- d. Enjoys humor and making up or repeating simple riddles, (typical for this age mentality is, "Why was the cook mean?" "Because he beat the eggs and whipped the cream.") It is best that the teacher not introduce real riddles at this stage; they are appropriate for older children.
- e. Memory becomes conscious; child can, at will or upon request, repeat stories and songs with accuracy

- f. Speaks fluently and clearly and can express ideas easily and fully.
 - g. Can concentrate on a chosen task for ten to fifteen minutes.
 - h. Image-formation: is no longer dependent on objects in play, but can visualize (e.g. may build a house and then, instead of collecting dishes, food, etc., may simply “talk through” the play). Conversations and discussions among the children become important to them.
 - i. Appearance of “real” questions (not the typical younger child’s constant “why,” or questions for the sake of asking).
- 3. Younger children may be left behind socially; this usually becomes apparent toward the end of third grade, and may become more marked during the change at age twelve.
 - 4. If there is any academic difficulty, it will be exacerbated if the child enters first grade as a younger child, and reading problems may become severe. On the other hand, if the child is held back, he may later excel.
 - 5. If a child is always youngest in the class, he may never have the opportunity to become a leader. (“Leader” here means not “the boss,” but one who has the inner strength and security to be an example to others and bring out the best in them.)

Factors in Borderline Cases

- 1. Boys are generally about six months behind girls in level of maturity at this age.
- 2. Unreadiness for first grade may manifest itself in the early grades as lack of stamina and concentration, and difficulty in keeping up
- 6. The composition of the first grade group should be considered: How will this child fit in, both socially and chronologically? Is it a “young” class or an “old” one, for example?



Nancy Foster has been a Waldorf kindergarten teacher since 1973 at Acorn Hill Waldorf Kindergarten and Nursery in Silver Spring, Maryland where she now works with parents and children in parent/child groups. She also lectures, offers workshops for Waldorf kindergarten teachers, and is on the visiting faculty of Sunbridge College in Spring Valley, New York. She is the author and editor of Let Us Form a Ring and Dancing as We Sing. She and her husband, a professional musician, encountered Waldorf education and Anthroposophy while seeking a school for their two sons, now grown.