

The Waldorf Approach to Reading *with Jean Miller*
Waldorf Homeschool Conference, March 2019

Welcome to this workshop on the Waldorf Reading & Writing in Grades 1-4. I'm Jean, a homeschooling mother of three almost-grown children. We've been homeschooling officially since 1996, inspired by Waldorf from the beginning. Our children are now all in their twenties – two boys and a girl. The boys are out on their own, our daughter is in college. I've been teaching for over 30 years and homeschooled for about 25 of those. I taught high school and junior high English in the classroom before having my own children!

Reading is a very complex skill that has many parts to it. There's a bit of mystery and magic to it as well, kind of like a code that needs to be unlocked. But the truth is that when children are in an environment rich in literacy activities starting from a young age, they learn to read when they are ready. Some on their own, some with extra practice, some with extra help. But almost all children given an environment that is really rich in these kinds of activities, learn to read. They crack the code.

Many look at Waldorf education and say something like, "I love Waldorf. But what about the late reading?" Perhaps you or your husband or partner have shared this sentiment. Typically, with the Waldorf approach, children are reading fluently by the end of 3rd Grade. Some children read earlier, a few even read later than that. But the curriculum is set up with this timeline in mind. And that is certainly later than mainstream education.

Why this more delayed timeline you ask? Because this is what's most developmentally appropriate for a child's developing brain. It's that simple. So here's a little brain science: In order for reading to happen, both sides of the brain need to be working together. Typically, the right brain is used for sight memory of words and for picturing a story. And the left brain for decoding phonetically. And when the neural pathways of the brain integrate these two hemispheres, reading happens easily. An outward indication of this – meaning both sides of the brain are developed, communicate with other and a child is ready to read - can be that a child can easily skip while swinging the opposite arm with each skip.

And so with Waldorf, the curriculum matches the stages of child development.

This right/left brain integration is why in the Waldorf approach, there is so much movement. And why there are many activities that involve what's called "crossing the midline" – where one side of the body does one thing and the other mirrors the opposite. Or where we engage in movement that crosses the center line of the body. This is also called cross-lateral coordination. And so many activities involve these types of movement: swimming, jump rope, bean bag tossing, dancing, ball exercises, many clapping games, even cross-country skiing. By the way, these same activities help to keep us alert when we feel sleepy, and even help with depression.

Our brains need this kind of cross-lateral activity, and children especially need these activities for healthy brain development. And literacy development is part of that.

Back to reading, in order to read successfully, we need both sides of the brain working together. The right side of the brain is the first to develop, and this happens earlier in girls and later in boys. That's just physiology. The left side of the brain develops later and is the part of the brain that can decode and sound out words. Both sides of the brain are often integrated around the age of seven for girls and more like eight or nine for boys. And when we honor these stages of development and bring academic work in a timely and appropriate way, children learn with more ease. So, Waldorf is on a "later" timeline for reading because that's how the human brain develops!

I want to reassure you that most children learn to read without much difficulty when they're ready. I say most, but not all. And that's where we can start to worry as parents, because if there's such a wide range of normal, how do we know if our child is on track? Or needs extra help? Reading is a very complex skill that has many parts to it. There's a bit of mystery and magic to it as well, kind of like a code that needs to be unlocked. But the truth is that when children are in an environment rich in literacy activities starting from a young age, they learn to read when they are ready. Some on their own, some with instruction, some with extra help. But almost all children given an environment that is really rich in these kinds of activities, learn to read. They crack the code.

Sounds simple, right? But I think because of the mystery and magic, because we can't actually see it happening, and because we don't know if our child will be one of the ones who needs extra help, we feel uncertain and even anxious at times! The truth is that we want to be mindful of planning activities and creating an environment in which learning to read can happen. Activities and an environment that are rich in the language arts.

So how do we do that? First, I want to reiterate that the Waldorf curriculum is jam-packed with literacy activities all the way from kindergarten through the elementary grades. What kinds of activities am I talking about? You might be surprised at how far-reaching these this list goes!

- nursery rhymes
- finger plays
- songs
- drawing
- verses with movement
- stories
- read alouds
- clapping & marching games
- form drawing
- handwriting
- even handwork (knitting is a cross-lateral activity!)

Here are some more specifics on language arts activities in each grade. Kindergarten: pre-literacy activities; 1st: stories & capital letters; 2nd: lower case, phonics games (blends), poems, naming doing describing words; 3rd: longer writing, cursive; 4th: compose letters and longer pieces of writing.

Really all of the engagement we do with our children when they are young contributes to literacy because almost all of our engagement involves language. The important thing to remember is that **learning to read takes years.**

One study showed that about 4 years after children begin engaging in pre-literacy activities, they begin to learn to read. And there are many stages to reading. First recognizing shapes and signs, then reading familiar words, then reading short, predictable stories (over and over again, memorizing), then early readers, and finally reading chapter books independently. Waldorf = Whole to Parts. Teaching reading is holistic: whole language approach (where you guess a word from the context) + phonics (where you learn to sound out the words) + sight word reading (where you memorize the word)! Mix the whole language approach with phonetics if that seems helpful to them. The English language is 50/50 – meaning that 50% of our words can be explained phonetically and 50% need to be memorized by sight. (Example, a “g” can be pronounced either hard or soft.)

Just to give you an idea of ages of reading, with my three children. Three different kids, three different ages. My oldest son learned to read at age ten, my second son learned to read at about age eight, and my third (my daughter) learned to read when she was six almost seven.

One of my top goals as a homeschooling Mom was that each of my children would learn to read when they were ready, and that they would enjoy reading as adults. I’m so happy to report that my goal has been met!

Here’s something I want you to remember: the normal age range for learning to read it somewhere between the age of 4 and 12! That's right! Normal range. In a classroom, the teacher *needs* children to learn to read or to be reading independently much earlier because they rely on that as part of their teaching method. But as homeschoolers, we are fortunate in that we can allow this to unfold on our children's own timeline.

Some children do need extra help. Recent statistics I heard from the authors of new book *The Roadmap to Literacy: A Guide to Teaching Language Arts in Waldorf Schools Grades 1 through 3*, are that about 40-50% of children learn to read on their own (my personal experience is that it’s higher than this), 30-40% need extra practice; and 20-30% need intensive, direct teaching.

So how is the Waldorf approach different when it comes to learning to read? Generally speaking, I think it's so well integrated into the curriculum that it's almost invisible to many. And the slower pace is sometimes off-putting to some. Often, in Waldorf education, children aren't reading independently until 3rd sometime, maybe even the end of 3rd grade. But I will

tell you that from all of my teaching experience with my own children, with small groups of homeschooled children, and even classroom teaching when I worked with remedial students in high school who couldn't read, **the Waldorf approach is the most natural enjoyable and successful of any approach that I know.** Hands down.

How does it work? First there are the pre-literacy skills learned from clapping rhymes along with a verse, singing with movement gestures, listening to stories told or read aloud. Lots and lots of stories. These all help children to move from pictures in their imagination to words on a page. (Inner Visualization)

Put simply, the Waldorf approach progresses from drawing to writing to reading. This is quite different than the norm where a lot of approaches start with reading and then move to writing. Waldorf puts writing first. So children learn to read their own writing first because there is a memory component involved – they remember writing the words and read them more readily.

Let me describe the process of drawing to writing to reading in a bit more detail.

So you read or tell a story one day and then you draw a picture or paint a picture from it for the main lesson book. The next day, you retell the story with help from your child. You can invite them to participate. Then the child writes a short summary on the opposite page in the main lesson book. In first grade, the writing might just be one letter or a word. As children progress through the grades, their writing extends to longer pieces. This is called the three-part lesson in a two-day rhythm. Part One is presenting the new material through story. Part Two is engaging in artistic activity. Part Three is recall and review of the story orally and in writing. One important aspect of this rhythm is that it happens over two days, not all in one day. The idea is that the child takes the story into their sleep and digests it on a deeper level, coming back the next day in a more receptive place.

One last comment about these years is that some children need extra practice to begin reading. And that can happen in the later mornings when you're NOT in a language block. So when you're in a math or nature block, you can save 30-45 minutes after main lesson to practice phonics, or spelling, or handwriting practice. Skills practice. Remember to keep it playful. Words are meant to be fun and help us to connect with our feelings and relationship with the world.

Favorite Resources:

Games for Reading by Peggy Kaye

The Roadmap to Literacy by Janet & Jennifer (an extensive reference book that is great if you find your child needs some extra practice or teaching. It spells out 5 stages of literacy and shows you how to teach through each stage rather than by grade level.)