

Early Childhood Parent Handbook



*“Receive the child in reverence. Educate them in love.
Let them go forth in freedom.”*

– Rudolf Steiner

“The best preparation for being a happy and useful adult is to live fully as a child.”

– Plowden Report

Dear Parents,

Thank you for partnering with **Prairie Hill Waldorf School** in gifting your children with their Childhood. Our children’s early years offer us a unique opportunity to create meaningful memories, form lasting habits, and enrich their futures.

This handbook will serve as an introduction to our Early Childhood Programs and acquaint you with information and ideas that we feel are important for the wellbeing of our young children.

We encourage you to reference the *Prairie Hill Waldorf School Parent Handbook* for further information on school policies throughout the year. Please ask your child’s teacher any questions as they arise. To quote Joan Almon, a longtime Waldorf kindergarten teacher, “The best protection for Waldorf education is the ever-deepening commitment and on-going learning of teachers and parents.” We hope this *Early Childhood Parent Handbook* will provide such support.

Thank you,

The Early Childhood Teachers



Prairie Hill Waldorf School

Early Childhood Mission Statement

We believe that early childhood, birth to age seven, is a unique period of life that deserves respect, guidance, nurture, and time.

We work out of Rudolf Steiner's pedagogy, believing that children have not only a physical nature, but a soul and spiritual one as well.

Meaningful work and creative play in a structured environment are the pillars upon which a healthy life can be built.

Of utmost importance is the development of social skills that serve the children in one day realizing their potential in relation to others.

Prairie Hill Waldorf School Early Childhood Tenets

Young Children Have the Right To:

- 1. Master the Physical World:** Young children are gradually “moving into” their physical bodies, and so need plenty of opportunities and space to move, work, and play. They are also building up their physical bodies in the early years, requiring warmth and movement. Their education takes place primarily through an active participation in the life around them.
- 2. Be supported by a daily, weekly, and yearly rhythm:** Consistency and predictability are foundational to children’s health, development, sense of self, confidence, and future learning. A breathing, unhurried unfolding of the day, the week, and the year benefits both children and the caregiver.
- 3. Develop in a mixed-age environment with a consistent caregiver:** Ongoing, nurturing relationships are essential to a child’s sense of security and emotional well-being. A setting that includes diverse ages allows younger children to aspire to their future and the older ones to serve, lead and nurture the little ones.
- 4. Develop social skills:** In the early years, much of children’s work is about learning healthy social skills: meeting new friends, sharing, waiting, asking, thanking, helping those in need, etc.
- 5. Have extensive time for creative, social play:** Imaginative, uninterrupted play with open-ended toys that can be continually transformed is the cornerstone of childhood.
- 6. Experience meaningful, purposeful, practical life-skills:** Ideally, children have the opportunity to join in, as they are able, with the adults around them as they engage in the daily tasks of life: cooking, cleaning, gardening, washing, woodworking, etc.
- 7. Have daily, extended contact with the natural world:** Indoors, the children’s senses are deepened and developed when surrounded by playthings made of

natural materials. Outdoors, the seasons, discoveries, and transformations in nature are a healing balm to the young child. Children are able to form bonds with the earth, which later transforms into stewardship.

8. **Experience the nurturing arts:** Children know they are loved when they are washed, sung to, given a rest, bandaged, have their hair brushed, or back rubbed.
9. **Help prepare, serve and eat nutritious, mind and body-building food:** Knowing the source of their food and being a part of its preparation are skills that will serve them throughout their lives.
10. **Be exposed to and take part in artistic offerings:** Puppet shows, live music, song, verse, and storytelling, provide children with a language-rich environment that builds their imagination, gives them pictures to inform their moral intelligence, and provide soothing human connections. Drawing, watercolor painting, and simple handwork projects allow them to connect their inner and outer world while developing important fine-motor skills and neural pathways necessary for later learning.

Classroom Placement Policy

“From the very beginning of his education, the child should experience the joy of discovery.”

–Alfred North Whitehead

Discovering new friends is one of the first and deepest joys young children learn. In Waldorf schools, the teachers make a concerted effort to build up each class as a strong social body. Of utmost importance to Waldorf education is the emphasis its founder, Rudolf Steiner, placed on social renewal. His ideals were far-reaching and included the knowledge that the needs of the whole are to be considered alongside the needs of the individual. We can begin to work with the idea that it is not only our own child we have a responsibility towards, but also all of the children in our community.

The Early Childhood faculty is committed to creating a healthy physical, social, and pre-academic environment for all students enrolled. To this end, we collectively review applications and evaluate feedback about the children from the applications, and where applicable, from previous teacher(s) or caregiver(s). It is our policy to assign children to a classroom based on age, gender, and temperament with the intention of creating a balanced social dynamic in all of our early childhood classrooms. Further, we assign children to that kindergarten which their older sibling attended, when applicable. This builds on the family and child's familiarity with the teacher as well as the classroom. The parents and teacher are also able to deepen their work and relationships with already-established foundations.

Much time and thought goes into the placing of children into the various classrooms. During the summer, the Early Childhood faculty along with the Admissions Coordinator and the Learning Support Coordinator finalizes the rosters for the Playgroup, Wonder Garden and Kindergarten classes. We thank you for respecting our process of creating a balanced group of children in each classroom. A letter from the teacher welcoming the child to the class will be sent by mid-August. Through trusting in the school's process and the destiny of the children, a healthy class is formed and all of the children benefit.

Home Visits

"No significant learning occurs without significant relationships."

- James Comer

In order for the teacher to begin to form a connection to the children and create a broader picture of them, we offer home visits. These are regularly done in Waldorf schools, as it helps to create a feeling of security for the children when they experience the bridge between home and school. The children can become familiar with the teacher on their own "turf," while the teacher can gain insights into the children's world after seeing their special hide-outs, favorite toys, or backyard. This visit usually lasts about an hour, enough time to begin to create a special holding of your child that will continue to grow as the year progresses.

Transitioning from Home to School

“We shape our buildings, thereafter, they shape us.”

– Winston Churchill

Stepping over the threshold of the school building offers a unique opportunity to instill lifelong habits in children. In order to begin building a feeling that school is a special place with special rules, we ask that you help support our community as we work toward an environment that respects people as well as property. It is important that the adults uphold the following courtesies for our children until they are able to take them up on their own:

- Staying next to Mom, Dad, caregiver or the carpooling adult’s side until delivered to the class teacher at arrival time, or to the car at dismissal, is of utmost importance.
- “Walking feet” (as opposed to running ones) are the preferred mode of transportation indoors.
- Stairway manners include holding on to railings as needed (as opposed to sliding down them a la Mary Poppins) and stepping down stairs (as opposed to leaping like Spiderman.)
- “Indoor voices” are requested unless or until the children are outside under the “Big Blue Sky” which can hold their “big” voices.
- Caring for our shared spaces (hallways, community center/gym, and playground) promotes both outer and inner order. Please take special care of the children’s cubby and hallway area.

Arrival and Dismissal

Beginnings are full of lasting implications, thus how we begin our day is important. Please make sure children have eaten a healthy breakfast before school (ideally this will include protein), are dressed for the elements, and arrive to school on time. It is difficult for young children to enter a room once the activity has already begun. If your commute is long, it is advisable to allow time for children to take an adult supervised walk or run outdoors before entering the classroom, if/when the class is beginning indoors.

The teacher will inform parents where to drop off and pick up the children prior to the start of the school year. They are prepared to receive the children anytime during the 15 minutes prior to the start of the day. At this time, the teachers' attention is focused on the children and the work of the day, so please save any "adult" talk for non-class hours. If something important needs to be communicated, passing a written note to the teacher is advised.

At dismissal, please make sure that the teacher knows when a parent is leaving with a child. If for some reason parents are unable to pick up a child within the 15 minutes after the end of the day, we will help the child into our After Care Program until parents or caregivers arrive. Please note there is a charge for this service.

If children will be carpooling, provide the teacher with a written schedule of the carpool arrangements and inform the fellow drivers of our arrival and dismissal policies. If someone other than a parent or carpooling adult will be picking up, please inform the teacher in advance.

Absences

If children will be absent from class, we ask the parents to call the office and leave a message, including the reason for the absence. This helps the teachers keep abreast of the child's condition and/or what may be happening in the child's life.

Illnesses

“We can begin to understand illness at a deeper level and see it as a challenge to the organism which, to be overcome, involves the child in a kind of bodily process of learning.”

- Michaela Glockler, M.D.

The children’s health is important to us. Each morning we pay special attention to how the children are doing. We are not equipped to care for sick children at school, and if children develop symptoms of illness during the day, we'll contact the parents to take the child home.

Please keep children at home if they have:

- a fever (we request children to be given one full fever-free day at home before returning to school)
- heavy nasal discharge
- a persistent cough
- symptoms associated with a communicable disease: red eyes, sore throat, headache, abdominal pain, fever
- impetigo, pink eye, chicken pox, head lice, or pinworms

If a child develops a communicable disease, please notify the school at once. We will then send out a form to alert the other families in the class, while keeping the child’s name confidential.

We will contact the parent if, in our opinion, a child is unable to participate fully in a normal day, whether due to illness, fatigue, or unusual distress. Young children can be especially overwhelmed by school activity if they are tired or not feeling well.

Clothing

“There is no such thing as bad weather, only poor clothing choices.”

-Ulrike Schnaar, Forest Kindergarten Teacher

Mother Nature is said to be the archetypal teacher, and we encourage the children to explore her as fully as possible. The puddles, mud, and snow call out to be played in, and as we have so few years to fully immerse ourselves in them, we take full advantage of these opportunities. At Prairie Hill, we want the children to experience the joy of exploration, so it is important to dress them in sturdy clothes, appropriate for the weather conditions. Dressing in layers is usually the best way to insure that they are ready for anything.

All growing things need warmth, so we ask that the children always have their back, stomach, legs, and feet covered. There may be a few warm days in the fall and spring when shorts are warranted. The *Prairie Hill Waldorf School Parent Handbook* states that shorts can be worn when the temperature is above 65 degrees in the morning. An outdoor hat is important no matter what the season: a wide-brimmed hat and sunscreen for warm days, and a warm hat and scarf, or face mask for chilly weather.

Media-influenced clothing, such as clothes with TV or movie characters, is not appropriate for school. Sports teams, large product logos or brand names are also discouraged. This includes underwear and undershirts. These types of clothes tend to influence the child and the play in the classroom.

All clothing that may be taken off should be clearly labeled with the child's name. We recommend that parents provide the school with a cloth, labeled, change-of-clothes bag that includes pants, a shirt, underwear, and two pairs of socks, all labeled, for those days when the elements get the best of us. Some parents have found it helpful to keep large garbage bags in their cars for muddy outerwear at dismissal time.

Items To Keep at Home

“If you want to see what children can do, stop giving them things.”

– Norman Douglas

In order to encourage as much freedom of play as possible, we ask that parents make sure that all personal belongings are left at home or in the car. This includes:

- toys and stuffed animals
- jewelry and watches
- candy and gum
- money
- umbrellas
- sunglasses

Media Policy

“At the empathetic stage, 0-7 years, the child is intensely sensitive, even vulnerable, to anything that comes to him from his surroundings. The child is affected even in his physical organism.”

– Margaret Meyerkort, Master Waldorf Kindergarten Teacher

Prairie Hill Waldorf School is dedicated to nurturing children’s capacities of imagination, healthy emotional development, independent thinking and positive action. In recognizing the harmful effects that electronic entertainment has on the development of these capacities, we ask parents to safeguard their children from such exposure. Electronic media includes television, I pads, cell phones, movies, videos, video games, computer programs and handheld games, CD players, I pods, and radios.

One could say that the premise of Waldorf education is: “to everything there is season,” and the season of Childhood is for learning about the world firsthand.

Children must experience physical reality at the most basic level before they are removed from it by the media's interpretation of reality. They need to create in the world and to hear and see the world's response to their creating. They also need to get bored, and learn how, when, and if to get out of their boredom. All of this is lost when they are being "entertained" passively in front of a screen. The content alone is not even the most damaging part of screen exposure. The affect on the child's developing brain and physical body is debilitating. Current brain research points to the all-important need for young children to move, play, and experience real human relationships, all of which they are robbed of by ever-increasing screen-time.

Beyond our own child's experience, the social network of the classroom and school are affected by our personal media choices on behalf of our child. Just as the creative, open free play and imagination of one child can enhance the experience of all, so too can undigested television, movie, or computer content negatively affect the quality of play, the content and tone of classroom and playground conversations, the creative thinking, and the innocence of all of our children. We put great value on the education our children receive here at Prairie Hill, and exposure to the media largely undermines our efforts.

Parents are strongly encouraged to become aware of the growing body of research about the negative effects of exposure to electronic media on children's brain development, social interactions, and learning capabilities and limit their child(ren)'s exposure to such.

Discipline

*"The heart can think of no devotion better than being shore to the ocean;
holding the line of one position, counting on endless repetition."*

- Robert Frost

The teachers at Prairie Hill are devoted to being the steady "shore" to the vicissitudes of childhood. We strive to maintain an atmosphere of safety, respect, and community to support an imaginative learning environment. Each child is

respected for the unique individual he/she is. Guidance is provided to the children in a positive manner to help them develop self-discipline, self-esteem, and respect for others.

Our approach to discipline is based on the Waldorf early childhood principles of rhythm, imitation and reverence. Maintaining a strong and reliable rhythm to each day and an orderly and predictable classroom environment resolves most discipline issues through prevention. The teachers seek first to model correct behavior, bringing the children along to right action. When inappropriate behavior occurs, the children are addressed according to their age and the nature of their disruption. Wherever possible, the children are involved in righting their wrongs, for instance, helping to mend a broken toy, or rubbing soothing lotion on a friend who was hurt. If inappropriate behavior continues, the child will stay close to the teacher, helping her in her work.

A child who is disruptive not only affects his own school experience, but that of his/her classmates. If a child's behavior continues to be disruptive or poses a safety risk to his/herself or others, the following discipline process will be followed:

- 1) The teacher contacts the parent(s) and describes the situation.
Note: The parent(s) may be asked to pick up the child early from school.
- 2) If the disruptive behavior continues, an action plan will be developed and shared with the parent(s). The plan could involve Prairie Hill's Care Group or others, if additional support is needed.
- 3) A conference with the parents will be scheduled to discuss the situation.
- 4) The teacher will follow-up with the parent(s) and evaluate the situation, based on the time frame outlined in the plan.

Communications

"I do not like that man. I must get to know him better."

- Abraham Lincoln

Good, open communication is a key element in the success of a Waldorf school. To facilitate good communication:

- Teachers maintain regular office hours for parent conversations and concerns.
- Teachers send out a class letter on a regular basis that is written specifically for the parents and caregivers
- Early Childhood parent meetings are held throughout the year.
- Extensive parent-teacher conferences are scheduled twice a year.
- Phone conversations are available by arrangement with the teacher when needed.
- The school's newsletter is emailed weekly.

In addition, it is vital for a healthy community that issues are brought to the appropriate person's attention for resolution and discussion.

- 1) Contact Your Child's Teacher - Your first point of contact should always be your child's teacher. The entire faculty has training in and a good understanding of the class and organizational structure within the school. The teacher may not be able to answer all questions but will direct you to the most appropriate person within the school to get your questions answered promptly.
- 2) Contact The Parent Liaison - Secondly, please consult the Parent Liaison for issues or questions that the class teacher is not able to address. (If your issue concerns the parent liaison, consult the Early Childhood, Grades, or Faculty Chair.)
- 3) Contact The Administrator - Lastly, contact the Administrator. The Administrator's role is to be a facilitator between all three bodies within the school - Board, Faculty and Parents.

Rest and Sleep

“Take rest; a field that has rested gives a bountiful crop.”

- Ovid

Being in school is both exciting and tiring for the children. You can help ease the transition by providing a nap or quiet time after lunch, and by using the time after dinner for calming activities leading into a bedtime ritual. We recommend that children take afternoon naps up until they reach first grade. However, if your child is no longer napping, we encourage you to provide quiet time every day after lunch. Pediatricians typically recommend 11 to 13 hours a night for children three to six years old. The hours before midnight provides the deepest and most rejuvenating sleep. It's ideal for children to awaken themselves in the morning feeling rested and refreshed and ready for an active day.

Nourishment

“Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food”

~Hippocrates

We are pleased to offer wholesome, organic lunches and snacks each day. Your teacher provides a copy of the planned meals and snacks as part of our weekly rhythm each year. If a child has a food allergy or special dietary needs, please contact the teacher and we will arrange for you to provide an alternative that is similar to what is being served for the appropriate day(s). We ask for your understanding that we are not able logistically to accommodate food preferences that are not medically necessary. Thank you for partnering with us to build healthy eating habits in such an enriching communal manner.

Visiting the Early Childhood Classrooms

Visitors are welcome when advance arrangements are made with the teachers and/or the school office. Visitors include parents, student teachers, teacher candidates, and others interested in Waldorf education. Visitors are usually given a task to perform while quietly joining the Wonder Garden or Kindergarten morning. A working adult brings a focused attention that enables the children to fully enter their play.

Before and After School Care Programs

The Prairie Hill Care Programs are open to students who are currently enrolled in the school and are able to successfully complete their morning classroom program. These programs have a lead teacher who is committed to working out of Waldorf principles, along with one or two assistants, depending on need. The programs compliment the school day and apply the same guiding Waldorf principles that are used in the classrooms. The children come to feel secure in a caring environment which provides a regular rhythm to the day, periods of free play, structured activities, exercise, nourishment, and rest. Requirements for these programs include:

- attendance during the regular school-day program,
- ability to be out of diapers during the daytime,
- ability to follow adult instructions in a group setting, and
- appropriate behavior.

Please remember that children who are sick are to remain at home. (See section on illness)

Before School Care is offered from 7:30 to 8:15 a.m. and is open to children in Kindergarten through Grade 8, with a limited number of spaces available for Wonder Garden children. Children will be supervised in quiet free play or study. No food is provided so please ensure that your child has a nutritious breakfast.

The Aftercare program is available from 3:15 p.m. until 5:15 p.m. It compliments school-day activities with a healthy snack, outdoor activities, homework time, games, crafts, free play, and clean up.

Festival Life

“Sound when stretched is music. Movement when stretched is dance. Mind when stretched is meditation. Life when stretched is celebration.”

– Ravi Shankar

We embrace the changing rhythms of the calendar year through a variety of festivals and activities. The festival motifs are introduced in the classroom through storytelling, song, drama, movement, and decoration. Some of our festivals specifically focus on particular grade(s) while most are celebrated by the entire community in school-wide assemblies, student performances and entertaining fairs. It is the communal nature of the festivals that connect parents, faculty, staff, and alumni to the students for meaningful celebration and bonding of community ties. Some of our significant festivals include: The Festival of Courage (Michaelmas), The Festival of Community (Martinmas/Lantern Walk), The Festival of Light (Advent Spiral) and Mayfaire.

First Grade Readiness

“Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts.”

– Rachel Carson

There are many factors that determine readiness for first grade. The Waldorf curriculum is uniquely designed to meet the children in the areas of physical, social/emotional, and intellectual development specific to their age. While

individual students may show indications of readiness in certain areas of development, it is our belief that children more fully realize their potential when all three areas have reached a certain balance and maturity before beginning the formal academic rigors of first grade. Our pedagogy holds that this first phase of development takes a full seven years to reach maturity.

In the spring of the school year, the kindergarten teacher makes recommendations as to which children may be ready to advance to the first grade. Our policy is that children must be 6 years of age by May 1 to be considered for this recommendation. These children are then taken through a First Grade Readiness Assessment.

Following a successful completion of the assessment, along with the kindergarten teacher's recommendation for advancement, the decision to accept a child into the first grade class rests with the kindergarten teacher and the incoming grade one teacher.

First Grade Readiness Assessment

“Sensory-motor development through the early years primes the developing brain for later learning.”

– Sally Goddard Blythe, Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology

At Prairie Hill, it is our practice to conduct First Grade Assessments for those children moving on to first grade, or those we are considering for first grade entrance. This assessment allows us to note the tendencies, abilities, and challenges of the individual child and the class as a whole. It also helps us to more deeply understand the children, their strengths, and their needs.

The kindergarten teachers lead the children on an imaginative “journey” as they play their way through a story which asks them to perform a number of tasks, most of which are physical challenges, such as walking a balance beam or catching a ball. As current research reveals, academic learning rests on the foundation of a well-integrated physical body. It is important that your child approach this journey as a playful happening, rather than a test. Be assured that we will not be putting any

undue strain on the children, nor asking them any academic questions, i.e. number or letter facts.

The journey itself takes approximately thirty to forty minutes. Please remain at school during the assessment, as each child moves through it at their own pace. A summary of the observations gained from this assessment will be shared in the children's end-of-year reports. It may also be shared with the first grade class teacher to aid in future planning.

Parent Opportunities

"One mother can do more than one hundred teachers."

- Jewish Saying

At Prairie Hill there are numerous ways for parents to be involved. These include Board and Board committee work, Roots and Wings (Parent and Family Association) work, fundraising, cleaning days, special projects, and festivals. The class teachers, depending on need, may ask for parent assistance at various times throughout the year.

Several class meetings are held throughout the year for parents of each class; the teachers will inform parents of the dates. It is important for at least one parent of each child to be present at these meetings.

The meetings provide an opportunity for the teacher to present an overview of what the children have done and will be doing, and provide parents the opportunity to come together to discuss the children's developmental stages and needs, ask questions, and get to know one another.

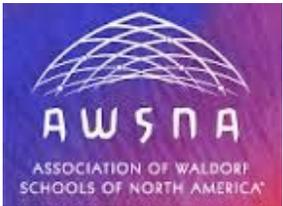
Social Inclusion

“A healthy social life is found only, when in the mirror of each soul the whole community finds it’s reflection, and when the whole community the virtue of each one is living .”

- Rudolf Steiner

We are committed to promoting a social environment in which working, playing, and learning take place in ways that foster inclusiveness and recognize mutual humanity, even while addressing conflict. With this goal in mind, our school has adopted the Social Inclusion Approach brought to us by Kim John Payne, an educator who is respected worldwide for his work in justice without blame, building self-esteem and helping children deal with conflict and social issues. We invite you to actively participate in building and maintaining a healthy social life in our school community by being inclusive when planning your child(ren)’s activities. For example, when planning a birthday party, inviting all the children in the class (or all the boys or all the girls), so as not to exclude anyone.

Thank you for taking the time to read this handbook. It is the Early Childhood Department’s intention that this handbook will help you gain a better understanding of our commitment to your children.



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