

IONA DAY NURSERY – OUR APPROACH



We strive to offer the highest quality of childcare in a loving and safe environment. Our work is influenced by the philosophies of Dr. Rudolf Steiner, and we endeavour to work towards the ethics and values outlined in his educational principles.

Rudolph Steiner was an Austrian philosopher who personally led the development of the original Waldorf School back in 1919. His writings on child development emphasise the importance of having positive role models in early childhood. His philosophies have their roots in providing a safe, protected environment where children can freely develop within their own worlds.

Here in the physical space of the nursery first impressions can often leave one bewildered or confused. There are fewer toys, no plastic and no gaudily coloured equipment. You will most definitely not find a television! Space is of paramount importance as it allows the child's imagination and creativity flourish.

Cognitive, social, emotional and physical skills are accorded equal value in the nursery, and many different competencies are developed. Activities reflect the concerns, interests and developmental stages of the child and the carefully structured environment is designed to foster both personal and social learning.

Emphasis is given to regular patterns of activities both within the day and over each week. A cyclical pattern is reflected in ring games and displays related to seasons of the year.

Physical, emotional and cognitive development are subtly and inextricably linked. This view underpins and informs the nursery curriculum, which is tailored to meet the child's changing needs during each phase.

At each developmental stage the child presents a particular set of physical, emotional and intellectual characteristics, which require a particular (empathic) response in return. This is the basis of a "child-centred" education. The formative period is seen as the period of greatest physical growth and development. Structures in the brain are being refined and elaborated, a process that is not complete until after the change of teeth. Until that time the young child's primary mode of learning is through doing and experiencing – he or she "thinks" with the entire physical being.

The nature of this early learning is self-motivated, allowing the child to come to know the world in ways most appropriate to his or her age – through active feeling, touching, exploring and imitating; in other words, through doing. Only when new capabilities appear, at around the seventh year, is the child physically, emotionally and intellectually ready for formal instruction. Through experiential, self-motivated physical activity the small child "grasps" the world in order to understand it – an essential pre-requisite for the later activity of grasping the world through concepts. Children are encouraged to master physical skills before abstract intellectual ones.

To complement the maturational timetable we acknowledge imitation as the prime means of children's learning – hence adults in our nursery teach by imitation, and most of what the children learn at this stage is imparted by example. The child learns for life from life (the acquisition of language for example, takes place largely through imitation) and children model their behaviour on what happens around them. Adult activities stimulate direct responses in the young child and staff members endeavour to carry out their daily tasks in such a way as to be worthy of imitation.

The children are welcome, but not required to help in our activities. The activities of the staff may inspire the children to become independently active, finding their own learning situations in play. Children perceive and register everything the adults around them do – it isn't only what one does that matters, but also how one goes about it. Staff members are conscious of their own moral influences upon the children, and of the development of good habits through imitation. One would expect to see a range of suitable activities for imitation taking place in the nursery. These might include domestic tasks such as baking, cleaning, caring for the room etc. All of these activities have a social, practical, moral and educational basis.

Steiner Waldorf nurseries identify rhythm as an important educational principle. Children need the reassurance of continuity, and regular events mark the nursery day, week and year. Seasonal activities celebrate the cycles of the year. A nature corner in the room reflects the changing natural world throughout the year, as do the themes of our songs, stories and poems. In addition, each week has its own regular rhythm of recurring activities, i.e. baking day, painting day, eurythmy day etc.

Every day has its own smaller rhythms which support the days activities. These daily rhythms help the child to feel secure and to know what to expect. A "tidy up song", for example, might signal the end of one activity and the beginning of another. The day is structured so that there is a varied pace – with periods of contraction and expansion – providing a balance between times of activity and times of rest. Working with rhythm helps children to live with change, to find their place in the

world, and to begin to understand the past, present and future. It provides a very real foundation for the understanding of time – what has gone before and what will follow – and helps children to relate to the natural and human world. Attention to rhythm promotes healthy development and leads to a balanced life later.

The minimal amount of toys we have in the nursery allows the children to play creatively and imaginatively – a wooden brick can be anything from an aeroplane to a mouse! A piece of muslin cloth could be a pirate's bandana, a superhero's cape or the roof of a den – the possibilities are endless!

Generally the staff do not get overly involved in playing **with** the children here, and you will often see them sitting and observing. This may sound odd, but we believe it is important that the children are free to explore and play **their** way rather than our way. We do not seek to lead or interpret what they are doing as we see this as taking something away from their experience. Of course we have to intervene when tempers fray, and we certainly have to have our wits about us to divert arguments, but self-directed play is a catalyst to learning. The wonderful thing is, of course, that the children don't know that they are learning and that they have such fun! Our role as staff is to provide them with the space and time to explore, to find out how things work and to discover who they are in relation to other people. If we were to constantly interrupt, ask questions and direct their play we would be stopping them from developing naturally and holistically.

If you have any questions on any aspect of Steiner's influence on the nursery then please do not hesitate to ask any of the nursery staff. They should be able to answer most of your queries, or point you in the direction of a very extensive reading list.

As with all childcare establishments we are OFSTED regulated. However, unlike most state nurseries, we do not seek to focus on early childhood education. The children in our care learn from experience rather than from being "taught". Please ask if you would like to see a copy of our most recent OFSTED report.