

**The Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School
Early Childhood Handbook**

Dear Early Childhood Family,

This Handbook has been created to serve as a bridge between your home and your child's classroom. A close home-school relationship supports the work of the Early Childhood Program of the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School. In cooperation with each family, we strive to nourish the young child's natural sense of wonder and trust, fostering openness toward life and learning and preparing the ground for healthy lifelong development. Working together towards this endeavor will help create a strong community in which all of us can shine. If you have questions or concerns, we encourage you to call your child's teacher for an appointment to discuss how we can work together to best support your child's well-being.

With warm wishes,

The Early Childhood Faculty

Philosophy and Program Description

The Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School is a full member of and accredited by the Association of Waldorf Schools of North America (AWSNA) and the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America (WECAN). In keeping with Rudolf Steiner's philosophy of Waldorf education, our Early Childhood program strives to reflect and meet the young child's needs that are particular to his/her developmental stage in life. The young child learns through imitation, imagination and the integration of his/her own will. This simple yet profound concept is ever present in the classroom as the teacher creates a nurturing and rhythmical environment where the young child's growing senses, imagination and awareness of self and others can develop.

Our Nursery and Kindergarten programs provide a homelike environment that allows the young child the opportunity to gradually transition into life at school. Through the careful cultivation of creative play, reverence for nature, practical life skills and artistic opportunities, a child will gradually become accustomed to working within a group while developing capacities as an individual. Each activity in the daily rhythm is carefully planned to nourish the young child's physical and soul development. The teacher arranges the activities into a classroom rhythm so that the daily and weekly activities follow a natural order of in and out breaths that nourish the young child's sense of well being. The children find comfort in the familiarity of our rhythm and soon begin to flow in and out of activities intuitively and effortlessly. A strong emphasis on outdoor play allows for healthy movement and a close connection to nature, which not only encourages a sense of wonder so important for later learning but also supports the child's own sense of wellbeing in the world. Every activity considers the group as a whole which fosters a healthy sense of community.

The following is a description of some of the activities found in the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner Early Childhood rhythm.

Creative Indoor Play

During playtime children are encouraged to play imaginatively with a variety of natural toys and materials in a beautiful environment carefully created by the teacher. Play is child directed but closely monitored by the teachers so that social learning and imagination can be guided and supported in a way that is healthy for each child and the class as a whole. Children may play by themselves or in groups of two or more as their age and social experience allows. As the year progresses so does the children's ability to work and play together empathetically. While the children play the teachers are involved in preparing snack, cleaning, sewing or other practical activities that the children are welcome to join. Within this free play time there is time for the children individually or in small groups to help set the table, grind grains, fix toys, and engage in seasonal crafts. While playing and working the children are integrating their senses of balance, movement and touch as well as processing their life experiences. The foundations for future learning are laid as they practice their capacity for speech and language, social and emotional interactions and cognitive development.

Circle Time

Circle time is a fluid blend of in and out breaths. Together the teacher and children embark on a seasonal journey of song and movement. Circles are created by the teacher to reflect nature, stories or fairy tales and nursery rhymes and are repeated for several weeks. This activity may begin with a morning verse and continue with the mixture of the sweet wonder of a simple finger game and lively and joyous whole body movements as well as songs and gestures that brings the children back to the

floor and finally to a cozy little rest with lullaby. Circle time nurtures the child's innate ability to imitate, which is the foundation of learning. Developmental movement patterns foster healthy brain development while repetition and rhyme create the foundation for memory and sound needed for later reading.

Artistic and Craft Activities

The children engage in watercolor painting, crayon drawing, beeswax modeling, woodworking, finger knitting, sewing and other age-appropriate artistic activities. The teacher leads the children in a group or a child can initiate the activity during play time. Artistic activities are often done in celebration of the seasons and encourage the child's natural sense of beauty and form through use of high quality, natural materials. These activities also encourage the development of fine motor skills.

Snack

The preparation of snack is one of the favorite activities of the day! Chopping fruit and vegetables and kneading dough fosters a healthy will and offers opportunity for the children to strengthen their fine motor dexterity. Like all activities held at our table, the young child will gradually expand his/her ability for task focus and listening.

Snack time itself is a joyful experience! All our senses are awakened with glowing candles, thankful songs, delicious smells and flavors and shared stories. We strive towards healthy table manners as the children learn to pass to their friends, wait to be served and eat after blessing as well as how to unfold and fold their napkins and sit in their chairs until snack. After preparing and after eating the snack the children always participate in various tasks of cleaning up and washing along side the teachers. The ability to follow a task to completion is a very important skill to develop. It paves the way for later problem solving and organized thought processing.

Puppetry and Stories

Puppet plays and stories foster skills of listening and observing and are created with the young child's growing attention span in mind. In Nursery when the very young child needs visual pictures, puppet stories are performed by the teacher inspired by nature and nursery rhymes. In Kindergarten when the young child can call forth inner pictures, puppet stories are continued but stories inspired by nature, festivals and fairytales are also told from the heart. These beautiful stories are food for imaginary play, social empathy, memory, clear speech and rich language capacity.

Music

Singing is not only part of our circles and stories but is a soothing and joyous way to accompany activities and transitions throughout our day. Songs inspired by nature, nursery rhymes and activities are sung for, blessings, direction giving or simple games during transition times. Teachers also may accompany their singing or stories with the lyre or kinder harp and sometimes there are simple instruments in the classroom for children to play. Music helps to foster the children's capacity for speech as well as a sense of rhythm and memory which are important for later academic learning.

Eurythmy

Eurythmy is taught once a week in their classrooms to the kindergarten children through meaningful gestures and flowing forms set to fairy tales, stories and songs. Eurythmy has been called "visible speech" and is a movement/dance art essential to Waldorf education. Watching or doing eurythmy helps children to deepen their ability to enter into the nature of sound, particularly of the vowels and consonants in speech, and the tones and intervals in music. Eurythmy not only develops physical health and mobility in the children but also an inner flexibility that harmonizes their feelings and ability to think on their feet. On another level, eurythmy helps to develop spatial and social awareness. Moving together cultivates respect for personal boundaries, responsibility for one's part in a group as a whole, and an artistic feeling for time and space. The social ideal of eurythmy is to have

the children feel at ease in their bodies and at home in the world with their fellow human beings, able to enter wholeheartedly into all that they do and to find inner stillness as needed.

Outdoor play

Adventuring outside in our playgrounds, fields and woods provides a wonderful out-breath for the children. We spend a lot of time outside in all kinds of weather. Nature is the great antidote for the over-stimulated world in which we find ourselves today. Sunshine, raindrops, mud puddles, snow are all food for the young child's sensory life. Reverence for and immersion in all that nature and its seasons offers us is the best gift we can give our children! This is also the time that the teacher may lead the children in seasonal activities such as woodwork, gardening and playground maintenance. As with indoor play, teachers closely watch as the children's imagination unfolds and social skills are learned.

Lunch and Rest

Children who participate in the full day will bring a lunch from home and eat and rest following the morning dismissal. Lunch time is very much like snack time and is a happy occasion usually filled with the children's own stories from home and is a time for learning table manners and care for one's own things. The transition from lunch to rest is a fluid one as the mood of the classroom gradually becomes peaceful and cozy, which creates a loving and safe environment so important for letting go. Some children fall asleep quickly while others need time to digest their morning first. Either way, the nap teacher lovingly holds the peaceful mood so that children can find their own way to stillness which nourishes the young child's growing body and his/her success in the rest of the day.

Daily Transitions and Life Skills

Transition periods between activities are equally important to the child's learning and well-being. Washing dishes and painting utensils, clearing and cleaning table areas and napping spaces, toileting and dressing are all accomplished with the loving and patient guidance of the teachers. This is the time for the children to learn organization skills and confidence in their ability as they care for themselves and their environment and work together for a common purpose.

Birthdays

We take joy in celebrating your child's birthday in the nursery and kindergarten. Parents of the birthday child traditionally provide the class with a special snack and are invited to attend snack and story time. Birthdays that happen during the summer are celebrated at the end of the school year on a special day for all the children with summer birthdays. Your child's teacher will confirm with you the details for the day of celebration.

Festivals

Festivals are a time for us to celebrate not only the change of seasons, but also the cycles of our inner changes as we move through the year. We mark such events with the children with special stories, snacks and craft activities.

- The first festival of the school year in late September is **Michaelmas**, which celebrates the kindling of inner courage and strength to face the approaching cold. Parents often join together that morning to work on a shared work activity, such as tending the playground, while the children bake a harvest loaf for the parents.
- **Halloween** is celebrated in school with the children only. We have a special snack and puppet show. No costumes, please.
- In November, when the light is fading and winter is near, we have our traditional **Lantern Walk**. All early childhood families are invited to attend this early evening event, which

- includes a story or puppet show in the classroom and a walk during which we carry our handmade lanterns into the dark night and sing songs of light.
- The annual **Spiral of Light** takes place on a Sunday in December. In a mood of expectation and reverence, each child carries a candle through a spiraling indoor garden to brighten the darkness with his or her individual light. The room eventually glows with many lights, representing how individuals coming together in community can give light to the world. Ours is a nondenominational festival that reflects traditional ceremonies in which one's inner light warms and illuminates the cold, dark time of year.
 - Every **May Day** on the first of May at 11 a.m. the whole school community welcomes spring with a joyful celebration of music, song and dance. The festivities take place around the maypole on the lawn in front of the grades building. May Day revelers bring blankets to sit on and their own picnic lunches. Be sure to bring water and sun protection.
 - Other events that occur throughout the year include all-school **Assemblies** in the auditorium at Thanksgiving and in the spring, an annual **Holiday Handcraft Fair** in the fall, and **Open Houses**. Please check your school calendar for specific dates for these events.

Policies and Procedures

Potluck Picnics

To celebrate the beginning and closing of our school year we enjoy a potluck picnic. These picnics occur on the first and last days of school at noon. This is a wonderful time to meet new families and get to know our early childhood community. Please bring a dish to share, as well as a picnic blanket, cutlery, cups and plates for your family. We begin each picnic with a song or verse and then share our delicious offerings. Once the picnic begins please remember that your children are in your care and they do require your supervision at all times. We look forward to seeing you there!

School Arrival

School begins at 8:15 a.m. Teachers are ready to receive the children at 8:10 a.m. We encourage you to be on time, since children who arrive late often have difficulty separating from parents and integrating into the group. Please keep your child with you until you greet your child's teacher who will then assume responsibility. During the first week of school, please assist your child in finding his or her assigned cubby (which will be identified with a special symbol) for extra clothes, blankets and lunch boxes. Creating a simple goodbye rhythm that is the same every day will help your child during dismissal especially if separation is a concern. Your child's teacher will receive your child with warmth and love – tears and all! Tears have a funny habit of disappearing shortly after you leave but will sometimes continue if the goodbye is prolonged. A warm hug and kiss and an unwavering goodbye will show your child that you know he/she is in a safe, loving environment. Once your child feels this trust from you he/she is free to start a day filled with wonder and delight! If tears last longer or you have worries, we are more than happy to discuss how to make the transition smoother.

Dismissal

Dismissal for the half-day program is at noon; the full-day program ends at 2:45 p.m. Each teacher will provide specific information on where dismissal will take place for each class. Please say good bye to the dismissal teacher with your child to make sure she knows you are leaving with your child. Any changes to your child's protocol for being picked up at dismissal (for instance, if another person will be taking your child home) must be communicated in writing to the teacher in the morning. For unexpected changes during the day, please phone the office before 2 p.m. and leave a message, asking for it to be relayed to EC.

It is essential to be on time for pick up. Children left waiting become anxious and teachers have additional responsibilities after school. Please call if you are unavoidably detained.

Parking

Please park your car in the school parking lot and walk your child in and out. *There is no parking in front of the building at anytime as that is the fire lane.* Please refrain from using your cell phone while in the process of dropping off and picking up your child, and enter and depart the parking lot slowly and carefully.

Illness

The best place for a child who is ill is home. Although our school is a nurturing environment our days are busy and therefore too rigorous for a sick child. When in doubt about your child's health, please keep him or her at home for the day. The teachers are very sympathetic to working parents' needs but we urge you to arrange back up child-care. Also please be sure to leave enough recuperation time after an illness. Notify the main office (413-528-4015, ext. 0) by 8:15 a.m. if your child will be out of school that day.

Health Information and Emergency Contact

Since your child spends a large portion of the day at school it is only natural that we partner together regarding the health and wellbeing of your child. Please inform us of any health concerns and allergies that may arise that are not already specified on your office forms. Similarly we will inform you of anything we notice at school that might be helpful at home. Please see the all-school handbook for any additional information about medical protocols.

Your teacher has a folder with your emergency contact form and it is important for you to always make sure that the office and your teacher are informed of any changes in your address, phone numbers and e-mail as well as those of your emergency contacts. We will notify you immediately to pick up your child in the event of illness or injury.

Snacks

Each class follows a snack schedule that will be shared at orientation. For example, Tuesday might be soup day and Wednesday, bread day. We use whole foods, organic when possible, no refined products. Please let your child's teacher know in writing of any dietary restrictions before the first day of school.

Lunch/Afternoon Programs

The afternoon program begins with lunch at noon. Your child will need a wholesome lunch packed with a small cloth napkin and a small mug for water (please no water bottles). Please choose a lunch box and containers free of media characters, and eliminate refined sweets and juices that curb a healthy appetite and can interfere with a restful nap time. Your child will need a blanket and pillow for rest that remains at school and should be laundered at each school vacation.

If you are interested in a full-day of school for your child (8:15 a.m. to 2:45 p.m.), we recommend starting at the beginning of the school year. Maintaining a consistent rhythm from the start best serves your child and the other children in the program. Extended care is provided by our Aftercare teacher from 2:45 p.m. until 5:30 p.m. and is available for an additional fee for families that sign up

for extended care or call ahead to drop in. Aftercare is held in our Early Childhood building and provides an intimate family like atmosphere for children from nursery age through the 3rd grade. Like our Early Childhood day, snack is provided and then seasonal crafts and outdoor adventures are enjoyed by all ages.

Clothing

We go outside in all but the most inclement weather. Please dress your child accordingly, layering to be prepared for changes in the weather. Rain pants and rain boots are essential for our daily walks throughout the fall and spring, regardless of the weather or if the forecast calls for rain. In winter, snow pants, jackets (or snowsuits) and snow boots are essential gear. Also needed, according to the season, are rain coats, mittens, sweaters and hats (winter hats for cold days, and sunhats with brims or visors in the warm weather). Your child will need sturdy inside shoes and a complete change of clothes, including underwear and socks, which will remain in the cubby. Please launder and replace the spare clothing at each vacation break. Inside shoes should allow for active play (i.e. no clogs or party shoes) and for the older children tie shoes are recommended.

We expect our students to be neat, clean and appropriately dressed for school. In keeping with the school dress code, clothing must be free of writing, numerals, cartoons, camouflage print, and pictures, and also free of rips and tears. We ask that nail polish, tattoos and jewelry not be worn to school. Clothing that is unfussy and that allows for plenty of movement and play will allow your child to freely participate in all of our activities.

Toys

We ask that no toys be brought from home. Our toys at school are for all to share.

Media

Over the years teachers have observed that television, video and computer use is detrimental to the health and development of young children and counterproductive to our efforts to prepare them for a successful school experience. Our media policy requests that parents eliminate electronic media exposure from the daily experience of their children, particularly during the early years and early grades. While we are aware that this concept contradicts modern societal demands and this may require making changes in your family life, please know that many of the families in our community, both long-time parents and teachers, have successfully met with similar challenges in their family lives. They may be able to offer helpful suggestions and advice for guiding children away from media use. It can seem daunting at first but the less you offer media to your child the less they will ask for it until eventually other more creative activities become much more interesting as the capacity for play flourishes. We encourage you to explore the many alternatives to media that will provide nourishment for healthy sensory, cognitive and social development. Examples may be found in various tasks at home that young children love to help do including gardening, dish washing, meal preparation, carpentry, dusting. Imaginative play, painting, coloring and crafts of course are also great alternative activities. Your teachers are happy to address your questions and concerns as you become familiar with the school's media policy.

Discipline

The all-school handbook provides a school wide discipline policy that is created for the elementary school. It is our task as Waldorf Early Childhood teachers to provide a safe and harmonious environment in which each child can feel acknowledged for his/her own gifts but also a part of a loving community. We also strive to be removers of hindrances so that each child can feel free to develop into his/her highest self. In this way we see discipline not as a behavioral alteration but a carefully cultivated social awareness that children are still in the process of learning. An essential part of this large task is providing a rhythmical day consisting of healthy physical activity, nourishing snacks, inner and outer warmth, loving words, behavioral boundaries and soothing activities that do not overwhelm the young child. This allows for the cultivation of imagination, reverence for the

world and empathy for others. It is also essential to see the children for who they are, to redirect them when they are having social difficulties and as adults to always model behavior that is worthy of the young child's imitation. We look to you as parents to share in this awareness so that we may work together to create a balance of healthy boundaries and exploration.

Welcome Night, Parent Nights, & 'Transition to First Grade' Evening

Several evening meetings for parents throughout the year constitute a program of Waldorf Early Childhood parent education. Complementing the all-Early Childhood evenings that highlight broad topics relevant to all are individual class nights that allow for more intimate discussions of each class's rhythms. The individual class nights not only inform you of your child's classroom experience but also help to create a parent community that values the well being of all the children in the class. We encourage you to join in these meetings as we, through presentations and conversation, explore the early childhood stage of your child's life. Please check your calendar for dates. All Early Childhood evening events begin at 7:00 p.m. unless otherwise indicated.

First Grade Readiness

Children must be six years of age by June 1 and developmentally ready in order to attend first grade. Children whose birthdays fall very close to June 1 will be individually assessed by the Kindergarten teachers, the first grade committee and/or the first grade teacher. It is helpful to attend the "Transition into First Grade" presentation in March.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Parent-teacher conferences will take place at the end of October. This meeting is for the teacher and parent(s), without the child present. It is advisable for both parents to attend when possible. This is an excellent opportunity to discuss personality, social skills and anecdotes and the best time to make sure parents and teachers are working together for the well being of the child. There is no school on the day of parent-teacher conferences, so each family will need to make child care arrangements. A sign-up sheet will be posted on the door of your child's classroom. Conferences at other times can be arranged with your child's teacher as needed.

Concerns

If you have any concerns regarding your child's care, we ask that you first take them to your lead teacher. Many problems can be resolved with open and direct communication. An additional meeting may need to be scheduled for a few weeks later to discuss the outcome. If after that you feel your concern was not adequately heard, it is best to ask for a meeting with your teacher and the faculty administrator. Similarly if a teacher has concerns regarding your child and together you can not seem to solve the concerns, a meeting may be called with the faculty administrator.

Parent Visits

All parents are invited to visit once a year on the day of their child's birthday celebration. To visit the class at any other time, please make arrangements with your child's teacher.

Thank You

Thank you for enrolling your child in the Early Childhood Program at the Great Barrington Rudolf Steiner School. We welcome you to our school community and wish you and your family a wonderful year.