**Sixth Grade Development Overview**

The sixth grade Waldorf school curriculum welcomes students into the last third of their “childhood.”

We remember how fifth graders were experiencing a unique phase of harmony, in body, soul and spirit. This was reflected in the beautiful language arts and history lessons in that grade that took the children on a journey from Ancient India (7000 BC) up until the age of Greece. The year culminated for the fifth graders in a celebration of the original Olympic games, in which the children practice their skills of physical strength, coordination and harmony. An atmosphere of archetypal innocence should reign in the fifth grade classroom, as yet untouched by the precociousness of adolescence.

By the time the modern child has reached sixth grade, he or she has most probably already begun to show the first signs of puberty. In the girls, breasts are beginning to swell and hips are beginning to widen. Boys’ voices have begun—or soon will begin—to deepen and “crack.” Whereas up until this point, a child’s movements tended to have a natural grace, at this age the growing bones increase significantly in mass, and the child begins to feel alienated from the body. Suddenly, feet feel as if they are far away from the “control center” of the head, and the child moves clumsily.

Importantly, these physical signs are almost sure to be accompanied by emotional changes. The natural openness of the child begins to give way to moodiness, which is generally covering up an underlying sense of confusion and heaviness.

In considering this passage away from innocence, William Wordsworth wrote,

“Heaven lies about us in our infancy,

Chains of the prison us begin to close around the growing boy.”

The Waldorf curriculum begins the year by introducing the children to Roman culture. Geographically and temporally quite close to ancient Greece, Rome evolved a more intellectual culture than their neighbors. Their art tended to be clumsier, but their laws and politics were all the more elegant. We can have the sense that the Roman culture specialized in learning how to *think* rationally and clearly.

Sixth grade Waldorf teachers often begin the year by inviting their class to creatively and collaboratively draft a code of behavior for their classroom. The code can be elegantly written and posted on the wall for the whole year, constantly inspiring and guiding the students to obey the agreed-upon rules and to aspire to create a just classroom society.

In the sciences, children also begin to come more “down to earth.” I have never met a sixth-grader who didn’t enjoy their block on mineralogy, learning to identify dozens beautiful rocks and crystals. They also study physics, learning how the physical world works. We can imagine how abstract this would have been for a 7 year old, but how it matches the evolving consciousness of the sixth grade perfectly!

In writing they work on understanding the laws of composition, understanding how to lay thoughts together so they develop a line of logic. In math, students work on fractions and decimals, including their practical applications in business math. They also work diligently on geometric drawing, practicing to merge precision and beauty in the creation of complex shapes.

In all of these endeavors, students are learning how to use the beautiful power of thinking to figure out how to navigate and increasingly complex world. The innocence of childhood is falling away from them, and they must now begin to be able to work with abstract thoughts. In the Waldorf curriculum, fortunately, these studies are always brought in a way that cultivate beauty and style as well as clarity and lawfulness, ever mindful of the urgent need to blend head-knowledge with heart-knowledge, and guide both into practical life skills.

Many schools are now celebrating the end of the sixth grade with the “Squire’s Challenge.” Over the course of many weeks, students consider different virtues they want to aspire to. They are guided to set challenges for themselves, doing deeds of service for others in their community. At the end of the challenge, students participate in a “knighting ceremony.” This may be conducted in festive costume, and preceded by a festive meal. Thereafter, each child is recognized by their “king” (typically, the class teacher), and in recognition of their accomplishments, “knighted” by their king (or queen). This rite of passage strengthens the young child in their aspiration to deal well with the tumultuous emotions they may be now feeling.

The eurythmy curriculum in sixth grade works much with very challenging concentration exercises, which demand that the children execute difficult coordination challenges, often with hands and feet doing opposite patterns. For instance, a pianist may play a piece of music with two voices, and the children must clap the upper voice with their hands and step the rhythm of the lower voice with their feet. There is also great emphasis on working with all kinds of rod exercises, which demand skill and agility in the body, and with geometric forms of all kinds. When students have become accustomed to moving the movements of language or of musical tones with their arms, they can now begin to do fairly complex pieces of poetry, building on the skills of doing contrasting things with arms and legs.

*Homeschooling parents who do workshops with me will learn poems and music for their children that I am not able to teach through videos! You are encouraged to gather friends together for a workshop with me to learn poems and music you could do at this age. Contact me at info@eurythmyonline.com.*