

## *First Grade Readiness*

When the child is somewhere between four and a half and six we usually begin to question whether or not she is ready to undertake first grade – an important question. Because kindergartners and first graders stand on opposite sides of a significant “consciousness canyon” - far more so than do first and second graders - this question warrants particularly careful exploration. We certainly don’t want to push a child who is not ready to cross this divide. At the same time, holding back a child who is ready is like clipping the wings of a bird – she will feel unseen and un-nourished by what we bring her. Clearly this is also a destructive option. However, important though this question is, it is important to remember that there is flexibility in the child: whether or not she is advancing quickly, she does not change overnight. Rather, she stands for a long time with a foot in each world (which is part of why it is difficult to answer this question formulaically). Still, we do not want either to push too fast or hesitate unnecessarily, so a careful look is warranted.

To determine which grade level will best nourish a child, we must begin by clarifying the issues addressed in each curriculum. In our fully integrated curriculum we are always looking at the development of body, speech, and mind, and at how these interweave or integrate to form the healthy whole. The curriculum at each grade level includes focus on developing particular skills which will serve this integration and that is certainly one aspect of what we must explore in determining Grade One readiness. However, within any grade level children will have a wide range of skill levels – in any classroom we see about a three year range in the full spectrum of skills. Therefore, skill levels do not give us the all-important guide to the child’s deepest needs.

**Readiness for Grade One, or any other Grade for that matter, is not primarily an academic issue, or an issue of any other type of skill development (physical, artistic, etc.).** Some children enter Grade One reading fluently, others exit Grade One barely recognizing a single word. Some who read fluently cannot listen at all, or fall to pieces trying to skip or balance. Some, who have been skipping since they were two, show no interest in written numbers and letters. These skill issues are important to note, to appreciate, and to address, but whatever curriculum we use with our child, throughout her schooling we will adapt the material and method so that her skills are nurtured in the context of nurturing the whole child. These skill development issues have little to do with Grade One readiness. The central issues of readiness for Grade One have more to do with the child’s core developmental/heart needs, and with having established a strong three-fold learning process.

## Core Developmental Needs:

In the Enki approach the content and methodology of the curriculum are structured to mirror the child's core developmental needs. These are quite different in the different grades – never more so than in early childhood and Grade One. The reason for this, and what is reflected throughout our core curriculum, is that the kindergartner needs to complete the strengthening and internalizing of “Mother” as a home base she can carry with her.<sup>1</sup> On this base, the first grader needs to see what it is to head out into the world with the world itself as her base. The kindergartner needs the seamless wholeness of the world reflected at every turn. The first grader needs to have the sense of relationship born of a separated self, reflected at every turn. As she moves between these years, the child is shifting matrices.<sup>2</sup>

For this reason, virtually all our kindergarten stories take the child through a journey out from a safe and dependable home, through a challenge, and *back* to the same safe and dependable home. Our Grade One stories take the child out from a home that is irreparably “broken,” off on a journey to find her own path, and *on to a new* and matured identity – she does not go back to the known home. This Grade One story structure mirrors the shift in matrices. Once the child's consciousness has separated or individuated to move to a new matrix, she cannot go back to what was once the safe home of seamless wholeness. Her safety will now be in relationship and in personal competence or empowerment.<sup>3</sup> When the time is right, this is what the child needs to have mirrored; this is where her health lies. If we were to tell her only of a world of wholeness when this separateness of self is pounding within her, she would feel unseen, alone, and abandoned. At the same time, premature movement into this more separated world is not something we want to rush.

The sense of separateness is, by nature, a contraction. This is mirrored primarily in the methods we use. Where the kindergartner needs a very fluid and formless rhythm – floating into stories, creative play, and the like – the first grader needs to take hold of her learning in a new way, a way that reflects her newfound independence and competence. Therefore, in the kindergarten we simply tell each story three or four times and leave it to stir about unconsciously in the child. In Grade One, we tell the child the story and then actively work with it in a structured manner. Clearly, this is more wakeful and separating and individualizing, and not to be rushed.

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1 See HTG/Overview/Child Development/body/stages

2 See HTG/Overview/Child Development/learning process/Pearce/matrices

3 See HTG/Overview/Child Development/learning process/Erikson/matrices

## The Three-fold Learning Process:

A healthy and stable learning process is the ground for all that lies ahead throughout life.<sup>4</sup> It is the seat of strong attention skills, and of the ability to be fully engaged and absorbed in the process of learning. Engaging the three-fold learning process is the only way to learn something truly new. Without it, we all fall to some level of attention deficit and small mindedness/prejudice. **Learning becomes a process of collection and not connection – delight is lost.**

The three-fold learning process is the one “academic skill” that is important to stabilize in the early childhood years. The health of the entire process is founded on the absorption natural to early childhood. This process begins with and is completely dependent on open intake and the ability to be imprinted. This is the gift of the oneness of early childhood. Moving prematurely into a separated consciousness will undermine its stability and strength and cause a closing down and shrinking of the world – much though our intent was to open and enrich it.

Often it is the child who seems most in need of “more” who is not well seated in this three-fold learning process. He is not in need of more or harder content material. In this realm, he is actually in need of *less*. But he is in need of something more – more sinking in. It is our job to assess just what is blocking this.

It is quite common for young children who are particularly bright to jump ahead of themselves and, in going too far too fast, actually neglect things that are important to their full development. It is up to us to see why this is happening. Attention to the rhythms of our days, attention to the busyness or barrenness of our environment, and attention to our own state of absorption/presence are the places to begin looking. Are the elements of our lives supporting absorption for the whole family? – this is the place to begin our exploration.

As well, bright children who jump ahead prematurely academically (in a way that is out of sync with their overall development) are often those with Sensory Integration challenges. *These children may well be moving quickly into a more conceptual realm because they are uncomfortable or insecure in their bodies.* While this shift in attention is a clever strategy to deal with discomfort (and we all try to avoid discomfort), we would be doing the child a disservice to follow his lead and move into more academics instead of remediating his root difficulties as far as is possible. Working in a more formal way with academics will pull these children more in the “mind” direction - into their heads and out of their bodies – further exacerbating the underlying problem. It is their sensory integration that needs our attention.<sup>5</sup>

Along with many teachers, remedial therapists, and brain researchers, we believe that the ground of academic ability lies in the body’s capacity for rhythm and in-

4 See HTG/Overview/Rhythms/Rings/weekly/learning process

5 See HTG/Overview/Rubber to Road/child/remediation/screening sequence

tegration. Furthermore, during this first stage of life, the time of heightened body awareness,<sup>6</sup> any **“skill building” or “remedial activity” which pulls the child into her mind in a separated way actually undermines her learning capacities and skills, and may even trigger learning disabilities because of the overall *dis-integrating* effect.** “Until about seven the brain is primarily a sensory processing machine.”<sup>7</sup> All conceptual work requires a stepping back and deprives the child of her most needed nourishment at this age. It is not just a matter of distracting her energy from what she needs to do – **conceptual work actually undermines the full physical/neurological development, the experience of wholeness, and the ability to openly absorb that are the natural tasks and gift of early childhood.** Therefore, although we do not work *directly* with academic or conceptual skills in the early years, ours is a highly academic program because we focus on building the foundation on which *all* academic learning depends.

On the whole, an early childhood environment that focuses on the child’s inner development will be a rich preparation for first grade. The child’s readiness will come from the ripening and blooming of the gifts and skills natural to the time of heightened Body Awareness. The first and all-important learning tool will be in place: the ability to openly take in the new and allow that to live in her. The child will then take on the metamorphosis of the first grader with gusto.

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6 See HITG/Overview/Child Development/body

7 *Sensory Integration and the Child* by A. Jean Ayres, Western psychological Services Press, Los Angeles, CA, 1979, page 7

## **Hearing the Child's Wisdom: modifying the curriculum to meet the child's needs:**

Even if all is well and the child is progressing with her deep learning, it is common for the “nearly six year old” to get a bit antsy in the last part of her kindergarten year. Sometimes this happens earlier still. The child feels her internal ground shifting and needs to find this mirrored around her. While the temptation to fill this need with academics is a common one, we do not feel that starting here is a good idea, for all the reasons already discussed. Rather, we recommend stretching and challenging the child with work that is fully integrating – challenging the body realm with more focused and contracted activities. More complex movement activities are a good place to begin. More complex and long term projects such as little gnome houses with furniture and rugs and gnomes, or embroidered play harnesses, can also be an excellent challenge and contraction at this age. These bring the child further into her body and thus into a deeper state of integration.

*Kimberly in Texas:*

*I'm using a long-term project to occupy an “almost 6yr old” who is experiencing an academic leap (and who already started reading on his own). We're working on a Gnome House, and I'm delighted to report that this is working beautifully. . . I've even moved the wood-working bench into my kitchen for unlimited access. We're all taking turns sawing off the base... Nathan is actually taking a 5 minute turn now... a radical improvement! Nathan has finger knit a ladder and a door, and all three kids took turns sanding and hammering a table together.*

*Plus, all of the sweeping and mopping has been a nice community activity for them when they are through sawing and sanding!*

In the Enki approach we do include some kinesthetic, rote memorization of numbers and letters. However, this is done purely through movement and therefore does not actually offer the increased contraction the child seeks. Content can be deceiving; this is purely a body learning, laying important ground for the work that lies ahead.

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Sometimes the child needs a small shift into somewhat more challenging story content to feel fully mirrored. Up to this point the stories will have had a very simple, obvious, and dependable three-fold order. Now we can start using the more complex tales that stretch the child to find that order within more complexity.

We can begin using the older quasi-Fairy Tales that revolve around the loss of the mother, which symbolizes and affirms the natural process of individuation beginning to take root within the older kindergartner. But these are still kindergarten stories in that the child returns home.

If the child seems to need a more focused approach to the work, a feeling that she is “doing school,” beginning to work with recall, with a very light touch, can be helpful. **This is literally a re-telling or reliving of the story. It is not an analysis or series of “what ifs,” but just a simple recalling, re-arising of the story.** Most children have been doing this informally since they began talking. Now we give it more form so they experience the quality of “taking hold.” This recall is a big part of the first grader’s learning process as she begins to take hold of order and sequence in a more conscious manner. For the first grader, recall has many purposes. For the antsy kindergartner it has only one: to offer the increased contraction she is seeking. This contraction needs to be in service of the wholeness that is home-base for the young child’s sense of wellbeing. We are not entering into recall to increase her wakefulness, but rather to mirror her more fully so she can settle back into the unconscious beingness of the young child. **We are using the contracted focus to serve the overall context of wholeness where her wellbeing is rooted, and not to move ahead more quickly.**

To introduce recall, we need to establish a steady time and place in which this will happen. Then the parent begins the story to set the mood. She literally begins retelling the story herself; this time her hands are free to gesture more fully – in so doing she awakens the child’s body memory.<sup>8</sup> In so doing, she sets a mood and establishes a world into which the child can step. **This is not a time for stepping back and questioning, that would undermine the open intake and unconscious digestion critical to this age. Even in the early grades we will not bring in questioning, but we will invite and ignite a re-living.** The point is for the children to relive what they have heard, to bring it up from deep within. Kindergartners are quite fully imprinted by the story and they will usually want to retell it in every detail and word. At this age, that is great.

It is best to handle recall with a light touch, letting the child contribute under her own inspiration. However, it is important that we DO NOT just allow the wrong sequencing to stand. This will weaken sequencing ability and foster confusion. Instead we might say something like, “Yes. That’s coming soon but first she . . .” Then we will tell the missing part. However we do it, it is important to keep the story mood, but not to let incorrect sequencing pass.

If the child is needing a more contracted form than the dreamy kindergarten offers, this recall should meet the need. If it does not, let it go – there is no reason to push this on the child and every reason not to.

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8 See HTG/Early Childhood/Subject Areas/Integrated Curriculum/storytelling

If a child, OF HER OWN ACCORD, shows an interest in writing, reading, and the like, the first step is to appreciate it as we would a butterfly or a pinecone. If we reject her academic pursuits or somehow shrink from them, that just causes a separating – this is who she is today. Rather than shrinking and focusing on who she “should be,” we can just appreciate what she can do and delight in it for what it is: discovery and play. Some children will naturally move into more conceptual work. That is neither a problem nor a plus. It just is. We can appreciate this as we would any other sign of growth.

At the same time, as modern adults we often have a disproportionate response to the child’s exploration of academics. Academic learning, like all else, needs a long period of open intake and a meaningful opportunity for digestion, if it is to serve overall well-being – and if it is to be really understood. All children practice for the upcoming phases. As we have said, in all areas of learning the child needs “a period of messing about.”<sup>9</sup> We need to allow this period in the world of academics, just as we naturally do in other areas of his life. When the child plays in the mud, we do not rush her off to pottery class or to learn to be a brick layer; when the child first bangs the pots and pans we don’t turn on the stove and start her cooking – we don’t even start drumming lessons; when the child plays “Mommy and Daddy,” we don’t begin sex education! This child’s interest in the academics is like Braxton-Hicks contractions during gestation – practice for what lies ahead – jumping the gun would be equally destructive in this case! It is important to let the child mess about in the world of academics without pressure to move ahead or suppression of her drive – just offering simple appreciation and delight as we would in any other area.

For children who become quite focused on letters – if they have gone beyond singing the alphabet song and pointing to letters they recognize AND they are rather obsessively asking about spelling and the like – then it may be a good time to start on somewhat more focused work. This work, however, needs to happen within the over-arching context or container of early childhood: wholeness. Therefore, we would not begin with phonics as they are the literal separating of words into sounds (or letters). Just as was true in the case of recall, we will be using reading activities to bring the child a deeper sense of wholeness, and not to prematurely awaken her. Therefore, if the child’s interest in reading is such that not engaging with it would cause a separation or split in her, then we recommend work with key words.

Key words are a formalization of a very natural process.<sup>10</sup> Working with key words begins with word cards. These are sight words that the children choose, which are written on a special card. They can receive one or two new cards each week (not

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9 *How Children Learn*, by John Holt, one of the initiators of the current homeschooling movement.

10 This was formalized and named by Sylvia Ashton-Warner one of the original alternative education pioneers in the 1960’s and ‘70’s. See *Teacher*, by Sylvia Ashton-Warner, \_\_\_\_

more than one on a given day). The parent makes a stack of blank, poster-board cards about 3" X 7". She also makes a nice box for them (a covered check book box works well).

With little fanfare, possibly at the end of a recall time, the parent can ask the child to choose a special word from the story she has just retold. The child will choose one word. The parent writes this word on a card and gives it to the child. She then gives the child the box and tells her it is for her special words.

We have found that it helps to have some kind of boundary on the kinds of words the children can choose - for example, only words from that week's story. Otherwise they tend to replay commercial/media images that do not seem to further integrate them, but rather keep them in a steady state of hype. Most stories have many words of all types and deal with heart images like mother, father, kill, love, hate, dragon, princess, sword, die, born, war. These are what make "key words."

The child may well be satiated just by having the card. That is great. If she is not, and she continues to ask for words, then introduce her to copying the word and drawing a picture to go with it. The child takes this card to her place, draws a full picture about the word and writes the word on a page or in a special journal (drawing pad). Let the child take the lead with this. More often than not, the child will do a few of these and then let it go - the need satiated.

However, some children will develop this all the way to reading and writing. If they are pushing to go further, they can add whatever other words they want to the drawing. This is done with inventive spelling.

Inventive spelling consists of words the children sound out themselves. These words are rarely spelled correctly, but they give the children a chance to wrestle with the sound/letter relationship coming up from within themselves.

We recommend not directly correcting the children's inventive spelling. This is a chance for them to write freely, to try something difficult without fear of "being wrong." There is a danger in this approach, however, which has caused many to throw it out altogether. The danger is that the children get in the habit of spelling a word incorrectly. Once they repeat it several times it begins to be held in the brain that way and is very hard to change.<sup>11</sup> We feel this is a real problem that must be addressed. We can make a small, common word sheet that has the common words the child is misspelling repeatedly. This will not fit in her box but can be posted near where she writes. All told, all of this is done with a light touch and the child is not responsible to follow through or complete anything yet. Most of the time, just the

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11 See HTG/Overview/Integrating Body, Speech, and Mind/body/superhighways of the brain

opportunity and support for academic pursuits is enough to satiate the drive and she quickly lets it go and move on to other, more integrating activities.

If a kindergartner is not satiated by working with key words *and* you feel that more formal “word attack skills” would be integrating for her, a slow introduction to the letters through quasi-Fairy Tales can be undertaken. To do this, work with the older Kindergarten Fairy Tales from the Enki Kindergarten Folk and Fairy Tale Resource Library. Follow the Grade One instructions on recall, drawing, and writing the letters (HTG/Grade One/Subject areas/Humanities/language arts skills). However, for the Kindergartner, for whom we want to strengthen the open intake above all else, it is best to continue retelling the story three times, then doing the recall and the drawing. From there, write only the letter in focus in upper and lower case. If the child wants to do more writing, have her pick out a word from the story for a key word card to be used as just described.

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When the child is showing strong signs of academic readiness, before taking any action, we step back, look at the overall tasks of this age, and assess the child’s overall needs. Below is the “observation/exploration” order we feel will reveal the deepest needs of the child:

- 1) Reevaluate and stabilize daily rhythms;
- 2) Evaluate the child’s “down time” to see if a real release into self-nourishment is happening;
- 3) Observe the activities she is drawn to, to see where she is seeking contraction and focus;
- 4) Observe the child for signs of discomfort in her body (sensory integration and allergy issues);
- 5) Work with more contracted or focused crafts and movement activities; and
- 6) Finally, look at the actual academics and, if we determine these will meet her needs, begin with holistic and loosely structured work in these areas (described on the following pages). .

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If the child is ready to do the “academic play-work” that is fine, but it is important not to mistake this for completion of the core Grade One learning – even if she is

reading fluently. When she is developmentally ready overall, the re-introduction of letters and numbers through Fairy Tales will speak to her soul and it won't matter if she is fully reading and computing or not.

*Betsy in Massachusetts:*

*In one of my first grade classes about five of the twenty-six children were already reading when the year began. They were at different levels, some stumbling along with Frog and Toad, and some felling their way through small chapter books. But one of the children was a genius and was already reading such things as Charlotte's Web – and doing so in an afternoon or two! He was also doing fairly advanced math computation mentally. Still, he and the other readers were always completely engrossed in the Fairy Tales and in the process of finding the secrets (letters) within them. Our little genius was so totally engaged and nourished by working with reading and math through the Fairy Tales that when he had to miss school he was very upset. One day I got a call from his mother at 6 a.m. "I am really sorry to ask this," she said, "but Sam is very sick, he was up all night with a fever and vomiting, but he is beside himself at the thought that he would miss today's story. He is sure this is the day Dominick Divide will arrive. I can't stop his sobbing."*

*Well, he was right, that was to be Dominick's day, but nothing is cast in stone, so I assured his mother Dominick must be ill too, because he would not come in without Sam. When both were well again, Sam was thrilled to arrive back at school the same day Dominick did.*

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Much as it is important to appreciate and respond to the child where she is, we do see children thrive more completely when they begin Grade One work when they are fully ready. Therefore, our basic cut off for first grade is that the child has turned six by June 30th of the kindergarten year. Particularly mature children - usually girls - born between July and September, may be exceptions. Boys often develop later and even for very bright, healthy children there is no problem keeping those born in April, May, or June back a year, if that seems *developmentally* appropriate.

All this explored, we want to offer a cautionary note: we have seen many very bright children moved into Grade One when they were still five or had just turned six. While most of these children did well academically, and even seemed "fine" in the other skill areas, NONE of them thrived. Most showed problems later on. In the homeschool, because the peer issues are not part of the equation, there is more

flexibility. However, if our child is to really thrive (and we are quite sure you would not have purchased this material if that was not a priority for you), from a curriculum standpoint, nothing is more important than being mirrored in both content and method.

The young child is living in an extraordinary stage of life - extraordinary in the true sense of the word, because she sees magic in the ordinary. Who among us has not watched a child twirl around, open mouthed, catching raindrops with glee? Who among us has not felt a shiver of delight or a pang of longing as we saw the sparkle in her eyes, and listened to her giggle? At such a young age, she has already mastered half of our adult task: to be fully present, moment to moment. She has a long journey ahead of her as she takes hold of the other half of being an adult: keeping an awareness of the big picture and all its implications. Along the way, her ability to be in the present will be pushed and prodded and tested time and again. In these few short years, the greatest gifts we can give her are support for her wondrous delight and the time and space to simply be who she is. What better investment can we make in her future?