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# **YORK STEINER SCHOOL**

## **KINDERGARTEN FESTIVALS**

## **Festivals in the Kindergarten**

Festivals in the Steiner Waldorf School are an essential aspect of the seasonal curriculum, each one lighting up the cycle of the year. In the Kindergarten these events support children's wellbeing in many ways, provide opportunities for physical activity, sensory experience and support personal and emotional development. Kindergarten teachers do not bring the content of the Festivals directly to young children. This is to avoid abstract intellectual explanations and to focus on providing meaningful activities and age appropriate and memorable experiences. The pictures and symbols in these seasonal celebrations are important living experiences for the children and teachers think carefully about this aspect of the provision. Where possible we involve members of our community to ensure that every custom is an authentic expression of the essence of that particular festival.

Our modern world is busy, at times chaotic and uncertain, and children's lives can be lacking in the consistent, predictable, daily rhythm which they need. Festivals can provide an extra layer to the daily routine of the Kindergarten, providing structure for the rhythm of the year. The children anticipate these events with joy. They begin to develop a sense that they belong to the community around them and are able to find their own connection to nature's rhythms and social and cultural aspects of human life. The sense of belonging, connection to friends and the wider community, strengthens relationships and teachers value the links between home and school that are provided through Festival celebrations. These special occasions provide a sense of security for the children, as they know each one will come round again, and they remember the traditions they experienced. Preparing for the Festival over several weeks contributes to the nourishment and joy for the child, allowing them to develop patience and a sense of anticipation in contrast to the instant gratification that is inherent in many of their regular experiences. These celebrations can also be wonderful experiences for families, time to observe their child in the school setting and also to make connections with other parents.

Celebrating festivals is important socially – they enable us to step out of 'ordinary time' and be connected with something more abiding. There are universal truths contained in each festival (from all religious traditions) – in a Steiner Waldorf Kindergarten they are celebrated in an uncomplicated way, using simple symbolism and qualities of each season to express the essential mystery of our place in the cosmos. A Festival can be as simple as families coming together to eat soup and sing songs. As these events are carefully planned and prepared by the teachers the children experience awe and wonder – perhaps due to a beautiful puppet play that might be at the heart of the celebration. They will also experience reverence as they sing songs, a candle is lit with quiet respect, and they joyfully share some simple, seasonal food with their families.

The young child lives in the present – what is important are practical, meaningful experiences. Therefore, the teachers transform their knowledge and understanding of the Festival into activities. For example, in keeping with a tradition of Hindu families before the festival of Diwali the children in the Kindergarten by cleaning the room and put new decorations on the table in preparation for the Festival. There may be an opportunity for making Rangoli patterns with coloured rice, making Diya pots and sharing traditional food.

An essential part of the experience for the children is working towards the Festival so teachers may try to include a seasonal craft activity for a week or two before hand, for example making

candles, paper moons or beautiful cards for family members. This preparation will also support different aspects of the curriculum in an integrated and holistic way, for example a craft activity may involve artistic and creative expression as well as the mathematics involved in accurate measurement. The songs and rhymes the children are taught may well include themes that relate to the Festival as well as supporting communication and language, and they will also be told an age-appropriate, traditional story each day, such as the story of the *One Hundred Camels*, developing their understanding of literature.

The way that the room is decorated for the Festival will reflect the seasons and will include the Snack Table and the Nature Table. This will include some special things that relate to that particular Festival such as flowers, beautiful lanterns, and items that the children have made. At the end of the Festival the children may take away some of the craft items they created, to decorate their own homes and to strengthen the connection between school and family.

These simple celebrations distil essential elements of the Steiner Waldorf approach to early childhood education and care, providing an age-appropriate experience of what it means to be human, to care for each other, the world around us, respecting and acknowledging the contribution of each individual.

## **Festivals in the Lower School**

The students' experience of Festivals in the Kindergarten provide a firm foundation for the development of these events and their significance in the lower school. The children will continue to prepare for Festivals over several weeks but gradually teachers work with them to develop their understanding of the meaning of specific celebrations, the themes and also the cultural and religious relevance. This will be integrated within their study of geography, history, science, literature, religion, and their understanding of the diversity of human experience within local, national, and international contexts. For example, during a main lesson exploring an area of the world, a Festival may be chosen to be researched and explored by the whole class. It may also involve the development of performing arts as they may put on a play or concert for school families as a way of celebrating a particular event. Craft, art, and handwork continue to play their part and the students experience great satisfaction as they complete these projects and share them with their families. Teachers may also choose to use food, costume, games and of course stories in order to explore different aspects of these culturally significant celebrations. Some of these Festivals may be celebrated by the whole school, each class making its own contribution, others may be smaller events, just involving one or two classes. Developing empathetic curiosity about their own and other people's beliefs and customs provides the children with an understanding and respect for the universality of aspects of human life and the significance of the lived experience and dignity of every individual. Festivals provide schools with a wonderful opportunity to rejoice in local culture and celebrate the extraordinary diversity of humanity.