

Program Statement for Little Lions Waldorf Child and Family Centre

Little Lions Waldorf Child and Family Centre is an organization which provides child care for children 6 months to 12 years of age according to the Waldorf philosophy or "Steiner" education. The following Program Statement is consistent with the Ministry of Education's statement on programming and pedagogy issued under subsection 55 (3) of the Child Care and Early Years Act, 2014 and #46 of Ontario Regulation 137/15. It is the policy of Little Lions to review the program statement annually to ensure compliance and congruency with our own philosophy and policies.

VISION: Resilient and compassionate children in a healthy, vibrant community where love and wonder are the basis of learning and living.

MISSION STATEMENT: Little Lions Waldorf Child and Family Centre Directors and Staff are dedicated to the principles of "Waldorf" or Steiner Education and Child Care. We strive to foster the realization of these principles through exceptional child care that nurtures the whole child, supports families, integrates varying aspects of a nature-based approach and strengthens the community.

GOALS Little Lions Waldorf Child and Family Centre will endeavor to provide an environment and programs in which each child will flourish and grow through the early stages of development. Little Lions seeks to provide a warm, home-like atmosphere with tasks and domestic routines to follow. Programs will allow plenty of time for imaginative play with a nature-oriented environment as expressed and practiced in Waldorf education. Programs based in nature will integrate aspects of the above/along with nature and wild pedagogies.

These broad statements find expression in the practical application. To accomplish this, each caregiver is encouraged to further their professional learning based on Waldorf principles and the Ministry of Education's policy statement on programming and pedagogy. We find that these two are compatible in that both demand that the caregivers themselves believe that children are capable and competent, full of curiosity which must be nurtured and that all children are rich in potential. Each child can learn and succeed given the right environment and so our focus is to create the opportunities for this to happen.

The Waldorf philosophy focuses on four main senses during the early years. These include the sense of touch, balance, self-movement (proprioception) and the life sense which is the sense of well-being that is critical for the healthy development of any child. We nurture these senses by our daily, seasonal and yearly rhythm, our sensory rich environment and the loving kindness expressed by all staff.

Children know that they belong in our program in many ways. For example, indoor programs will have individual cubbies and a chair that has their own personal chair cover. Children in outdoor programs will have a voice each morning to determine where the group will play. Most importantly, they know they belong because the caregivers can be trusted to make them welcome, to know them and to provide for their unique needs.

Each child is seen as an individual and we strive to see them for who they are. We strive to recognize their strengths and find the opportunities to further their development. Frequently this happens through play-based assessment or through the keen observation of trained, caring staff. Relating to children respectfully involves taking into account what they need and want. Encouraging them to express and act out on their preferences builds and strengthens a sense of responsibility for themselves and supports the idea that children are active contributors to their own and other's experiences. Children's participation in play is a valuable way to support their development and learning. Making decisions and having choices are very important elements in the daily experience. Child-initiated and adult-supported play experiences afford children the opportunities to develop autonomy and independence as well as to learn social and relationship skills as they explore their interdependence and connectedness with peers, educators and, in parent cooperatives, the 'duty parents'.

The staff supports children in their ability to self-regulate. All practices are respectful of a child's autonomy while being conscious of the need for safe exploration of the environment during play and positive interactions with other children and adults. This may be achieved through environments (natural or set-up by adults) for children to successfully and safely explore, role-modeling appropriate language and communication and otherwise finding just the right tool for a child to use to achieve self-regulation. Staff role model appropriate language and communication at all times. Empathy is developed through the use of the healing basket which helps children to focus on the healing act following an incident where another child has been hurt. All staff create a safe social environment by their awareness of

group dynamics which then guides their practice (eg. setting up the program room).

Our environments provide opportunities for children to learn to care for themselves, their peers, adults and the rest of the natural world as well as the materials around them. Indoor programs have plants, pets, and babies (dolls) that need to be cared for. They have special items that must be handled with care, so children learn to have reverence for something that is precious. The environment is inviting, appealing to their changing interests and needs and is aesthetically pleasing, with furniture, toys and furnishings made from natural materials. Broken toys are often mended in the program with or by children. Programs situated in natural settings foster a sharing spaces perspective that is respectful of the more-than-human world.

Our trained staff are cognizant of the fact that a healthy rhythm to the day is crucial. We strive for a flow to the day rather than a schedule. In this way, the day may flow more according to the interests and activity level of the children rather than the clock. The day must have a "breathing" quality with moments of activity and moments that are more subdued. For example, an in-breath such as story time might be followed by an out-breath such as active running. We are respectful of the need for all children to have a rest time or quiet time, even if they do not sleep. Children may decide if they will sleep or rest quietly. Quiet activities, such as fidget bags, will be available for children choosing to rest quietly. As much as possible we allow the children to find their own natural rhythm for rest or sleep. We support their oral language development through storytelling, songs, traditional rhymes and games which are also built in to the rhythm of the day. Staff members sing through the transitions which tend to be slow and natural.

In positive learning environments, indoor playground and natural settings, experiences are child-initiated rather than contrived by the adults. Children are actively involved in the care of their environments. For example, in-playground and gardens, they may be engaged in meaningful tasks such as raking, sweeping and shoveling. In natural settings children will be involved in habitat monitoring. By dressing appropriately, children can enjoy outdoor play in most types of weather. To make this affordable for parents, we often rent waterproof clothing to families to spare them the expense of purchasing high quality outerwear. This enables children to play in wet weather and to enjoy puddles without inconvenience to the parent. The role of the adult is to observe their play, notice their

interests, emerging ideas and developmental needs, plan and offer experiences accordingly, find ways to extend the learning and therefore optimize the child's development. At times the adult may role model a new experience, inviting the child to join in and supporting their learning through the process which encourages on-going learning. Our goal is for children to be self-motivated learners. The emphasis is on process rather than an end result and healthy play is observed, valued, encouraged and supported by the staff.

Our playgrounds are natural and do not include any playground climbing structure. All playgrounds include a sandbox, gardening area or containers, logs and stumps, trees, rocks and other natural items. A variety of tools, equipment and "loose parts" is provided to ensure that children can interact with the natural environment in a creative way which supports inquiry-based learning. Artistic endeavours are promoted outdoors through simple means such as chalk drawings and collaging natural items and sometimes more complex crafts or activities such as weaving with natural items. We promote healthy gross motor play such as running, jumping and climbing (when safe) and often take children on excursions to places where this is most likely to happen. In programs set in natural settings, such as the Wild Roots program, nature provides the environment and materials for children to engage with. Tools, such as magnifying glasses, whittling tools, and baskets, are offered to deepen children's engagement. In the summer we support play in nature by renting Tapiola where children can roam the 14 acres of field and forest and can enjoy play in the river as well as tending the community garden which we plant there every June during our Family BBQ. Some staff members have received special training from various organizations to give them skills in this area, such as Monarch Teacher Network, Voices From the Land, Forum for Ecological Education and Action and Ecological Leadership. Some of our sites compost although not all are allowed to do so depending on the school policy. In general, our organization works hard to support the staff so that they will be equally excited to be outdoors as the children are.

Health and safety is a priority. We not only follow the common guidelines, but we far exceed them in some cases. We consider all aspects of the child's safety including recent research which shows that "no risk" environments have a detrimental effect on children. To achieve that balance, our supervisors have been trained to do "Benefit Risk Assessments" and are encouraged to do this in all programs, indoors and outdoors, with their staff and where appropriate, with the children.

Food is prepared daily on site by the cook, or, in the case of a satellite program, food is catered from one of our main sites. Our food policy is extensive, taking into account information from the Thunder Bay District Health Unit and Algoma Public Health in regards to nutrition as well as supplementary information from Waldorf sources. We start with high quality ingredients, often organic, locally purchased if possible. We avoid foods with excess fats, sugars, hormones, high levels of mercury, preservatives. Environmental issues are taken into account in the procuring of local food and purchasing practices in regards to packaging, etc. Every effort is made to provide wholesome food prepared with attention to safe food handling and storage. In programs where families provide their children's lunch and snacks, parents will be made aware of the program's food policies and will be encouraged to provide foods that adhere to these practices. Care is taken to serve food in an aesthetically pleasing manner in a home-like setting which fosters a sense of community. Food is served family – style with children encouraged to self-serve when possible. In many programs, children are frequently included in food preparation and wash their dishes following their snack. Foods from various cultures are enjoyed.

Ongoing open communication with parents is essential for us to work as a team to support their children to achieve their goals. Staff members strive to communicate verbally daily with families and, in some programs, through daily records as well as through the monthly and quarterly newsletters. As much as possible, we try to be there when the parent needs us. Over time this develops into a trusting relationship which facilitates open communication. Communication with parents today, of necessity, must take many forms and we strive to reach parents in the method that best suits them and their life style, be it by telephone, bulletin postings, newsletters or email. In parent cooperatives, families play an integral role. Duty parents (those who assist during program time) will participate in pre-program sessions to familiarize them with early childhood, nature and wild pedagogies. Monthly meetings will provide opportunities to further explore how children and adults learn and grow with nature.

A trusting relationship between co-workers and administration is also fostered. We do this by transparency regarding financial practices and decisions that directly impact staff. Staff members are informed of the reason for most situations or decisions, for example, regarding wages, benefits, funding requests, major purchases and other decisions that affect them.

Weekly staff meetings ensure that issues arising are dealt with in a timely manner. We are proactive rather than reactive and this opportunity for frank and open discussion enables us to better support the children and families. Weekly meetings also include opportunities to discuss topics related to the four principles of "How Does Learning Happen?" as well as the Waldorf philosophy and nature and wild pedagogies. Weekly staff meeting time may also be used for team planning where staff consider the interests and needs of the children they have observed during the previous week. Occasionally, staff will conduct a child study according to the Waldorf philosophy.

Staff complete an annual Self-Evaluation and a Behaviour Management Self-Evaluation (followed by action plans when deemed necessary by the supervisor) to ensure positive interactions with children at all times. The staff is instructed in the aspects of the Waldorf philosophy that relate to the well-being of children, including emotional and spiritual well-being. Positive interactions with parents occur daily and take many forms from the initial interview process, an extensive application form which includes the child's history, a home visit if desired, through the orientation and daily written and verbal communication with staff. We find that interactions are always better when people are well-rested. We want our staff to be patient with children and that is enhanced if they are not tired or over-worked. For this reason, our centre has adopted a four-day work week to support their well-being physically and mentally. In addition we provide opportunities for counselling through an EFAP program to ensure good mental health.

We realize how important it is for our staff to have professional development opportunities that are both mainstream and Waldorf. Little Lions has started its own 400-hour Waldorf training for staff so that, over time, we will be able to have an ECE faculty which is also Waldorf trained. Presenters from all over the world (England, New Zealand, British Columbia, USA) come on a regular basis to work with all staff because we want the most current and relevant training we can find. We also offer training in nature pedagogy. Our staff appreciates this and it has enabled us to build a community of learners.

Little Lions is a Red Cross Training Partner so we ensure that all our staff not only have their First Aid training but also have regular updates that include child care specific examples. We provide an annual workshop on Choking to raise the awareness of parents.

We see ourselves as integral to the community and are committed to collaborating with community agencies, schools and professionals in order to support children, their families and staff. Our organization does this by participating actively with such organizations as Roots of Empathy and Healthy Kids Community Challenge. We have staff trained to offer Fair Start screening. We regularly use the services of Children's Centre Thunder Bay and Thunder Bay Health Unit to better support any children with special needs. We take part in Welcome to Kindergarten Nights as well as participating with Parent Councils in our Municipalities. We take part in assemblies and school events, working in partnership or taking a leadership role, such as Weed Out Hate Day. We have built strong connections with other agencies that support families in need, such as Dilico, and have worked to create a child care centre that has been invaluable in supporting young single mothers, our most vulnerable population.

The Waldorf philosophy is one that stresses the need for continual striving toward our ideals. We believe that we are always in the process of "becoming", adults and children alike, and so in order to further this, we must look at ourselves as well as at children. This need for self-reflection is integral to our working in this field. As part of our on-going assessment, we invite feedback from parents bi-annually although we welcome it at any time. For the ease of parents, we offer opportunities for feedback at our annual parent interviews in the fall and in the spring parents are asked to fill in a parent survey. This may be done on-line or on paper. New families are asked to complete an entrance survey so that we know how well we are doing when it comes to welcoming and integrating new families, at making this "their home away from home". The parent exit survey allows for candid and honest feedback from families once they are out of the centre.

Future goals for our organization include improving our pedagogical documentation and ongoing communication with parents. We hope to go beyond the typical family board that we are currently using. This will take many forms including digital documentation as we explore current practices on making learning and interactions visible, to find a tool or practice that meets our needs, the needs of the families and complies with the Waldorf philosophy.

Another goal is wider use of play-based assessment in which some of our staff members are currently being trained.

We see our child care centre as a “learning organization” where knowledge and information is readily available so that decision – making can happen at many levels. We are striving for the autonomy for each centre under the umbrella of the larger organization. Our approach in this regard is for each Site Supervisor to have a form and financial formula which allows them to truly see the impact of their daily decisions. They meet quarterly with the bookkeeper to see if they are meeting budget expectations. These meetings may be followed up by meeting with the CEO to discuss their decision-making process and the impact it has on the running of the centre. Another aspect of this study of our individual centres is to see ourselves through the eyes of our community partners. We have a Community Partner Feedback Form that was previously circulated annually. We will re-instate this practice as a goal for this year.

The program statement will be read by all staff upon hire and annually thereafter during the annual Policy and Procedure Manual review. The program statement will be the new standard to which we hold all our staff but we see this as a living document which will change over time. Job expectations and performance appraisals will reflect this. Staff meetings will be a time for site supervisors to reflect on the program with their staff to further their understanding of the organization’s philosophy and practices and to find opportunities for improvement. Site Supervisor meetings, which happen approximately every three weeks, will be a time for us to reflect on the program statement to ascertain whether or not we are achieving our goals or if new goals are necessary. These findings will be brought forward to the board by the CEO.

This program statement may be taken as our assurance we are committed to live the vision we espouse.