

Simplicity

By Ashley Mueller, Caregiver at Milwaukee LifeWays Center

We live in a society where everyone wants more, more, more, of everything. Being surrounded by this 'over the top' frame of mind, it without a doubt trickles down to those most impressionable of all, children. Unquestionably, this mentality is not appropriate for a child. In addition, it will in the long run have an immense effect on and in turn dictate their views and actions in the future. What children need most is not more of those things lacking content, but rather simplified, purposeful outlets that allow them to be children. LifeWays provides a sanctuary that preserves and promotes the simplicity of early childhood.

What I have learned most though the Waldorf philosophy and the work of LifeWays is the key concept of less is more. By providing children with a simple environment both aesthetically, and in quantity of materials, children's play can expand. Children do not need bright walls, endless toys, and media sources to enjoy play. In environments such as these, children are bombarded with sensory overload. Elaborate, manufactured toys can take away from a child's ability to create and pretend. When children are presented materials such as cloths and wicker baskets, they have the opportunity to create their world of play around them vs. plastic toys that have a predisposed use by a child. Simple items allow children to explore the materials, interpret and play with them in a way that is meaningful to them as individuals.

Simplicity occurs in the daily rhythm as well at LifeWays. There is a natural flow to the day from one moment to the next which provides a sense of security and calmness to the children in knowing what to 'expect next'. I can recall previous childcare experiences where the schedule was rigid and children were rushed from one activity to another in order to follow what was to happen next, with what was 'happening next' being yet another activity determined by the adult. A day at LifeWays is a complete contrast to that experience. Although there is a "schedule" we follow, it is basic and more so a skeleton, to be filled in by ideas and activities brought about by the children. There is always room for change and it develops as the day goes on.

The curriculum provides simplicity in that it evolves around what the children are interested in both as a group and individually. Unlike other childcare or preschool programs that push academics, or have a preset timetable of what children should know and when they should know it, LifeWays focuses on what the children are focusing on and are cognitively ready for. The curriculum changes and develops as vastly as the children do.

It is because of the intentional focus on simplicity that children have a more productive, positive experience at LifeWays in all realms of development. What I have noticed through my contrasting experiences in childcare is that children at LifeWays have a greater ability to focus on their play, and do so in more detail. They are able to less stressfully move throughout their day because they are aware of the rhythm that occurs within a day. I believe this is because of the lack of a manufactured, over processed environment, as well as a child directed curriculum that provides children with what they need.