

Harvest Thanksgiving Festival in a Waldorf Kindergarten in Norway

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These days, with the current global situation, I think festivals in kindergartens are particularly important in many ways. It is difficult to pick one specifically, but festivals seem to be essential and important no matter where you are in the world. They are connected to culture, tradition and the integral to the rhythm of the year's cycle.

During the Harvest Thanksgiving festival we want to convey qualities such as gratitude, joy, and sensory experiences.

I want to describe our way of celebrating, although you will find as many ways of doing it as there are kindergartens in Norway, but we do have a lot in common. Of great importance is the connection to the nature in a time where it has become more and more distant. Children of today are not usually living on a farm. We get our food from the shop, often ready-made meals, without having any idea from where it comes.

The significance of following the process of how food is made and being able to make meals from the source is of great value for children in our time. Children need to develop resilience to be able to meet and understand the world. To let them experience transparency in where their food comes from and learn how to prepare a meal will help them with their self-esteem. We are all born with an innate capacity for resilience, which is needed to be able to develop social competence. Joy and wonder in addition to love, rhythm, trust, caring, having enough time, following a process, seeing things through, mastering skills and feeling self-esteem are implicit when we prepare for our festival.

The festival is a tribute to the growth of the soil and by decorating the kindergarten with flowers, fruits, and vegetables, we are ready to celebrate the day which is the highlight, but we start long before that.

The preparation with the children begins already 3-4 weeks before the festival when we visit a farm from where we get to cut grain for our breads. Eager little children's hands, occasionally with a help of an adult, are cutting the grain. If we are lucky, we will also visit the animals on the farm. We experience all the senses connected to the work and life on the farm. After working with cutting and binding the grain, it is time for lunch. Sitting outside on the grass, eating our lunch, what can be better than that!



Cutting and Binding



Harvesting

Back in our kindergarten we hang up the grain to dry for a week before we can thresh and grind grains into flour. We learn that the process making flour takes time.

In the garden we grow vegetables and herbs and now is the time to harvest with the children, and in addition every child will bring some fruit, or vegetable from home to contribute to our festival meal.

We are lucky to have a big chestnut tree in the garden which is a treasure in many ways. We collect all the nuts, even though we cannot eat them, and we decorate and use them in play. This time of the year we get lots of them and the children are thrilled.

Once a week we go for a longer walk into the nearby woods to find some wildflowers, leaves, twigs, and branches to decorate the kindergarten and the season table.

We experience that the free play during these weeks before the festival is blooming, and the children are creative and inspired by what is happening in nature.

In the final week we are busy grinding grain into flour in a grain mill and we must work for many days to get enough flour for small breads for each child to take home. Every child will bake his/her own bread and we make some breads for the nursery group.

In the final week we use the morning ring to churn butter. Sitting around in a circle on the floor, the adults have small glasses with lids filled with cream. As we sing: *"shake, shake cream, what do you think it's going to be, we won't tell you now"*.

We let the glass of cream go around the circle and shake the glass for so long that the cream separates and turns into butter. For those children who experience this for the first time it is a big surprise. The butter is put in the fridge for the feast.

Along with all the preparation our morning ring contains songs about autumn and the farmer's harvest. How nature changes colour, how the leaves are turning yellow, red, and brown, how the wind is blowing, the rain is pouring down and the farmer has a lot of work to do on his farm.

With songs, verses, and movements/gestures we visualize everything we do and what is happening in nature this time of the year.

Finally, the day arrives, and the children and adults are all dressed up like little farmers and farmer's wives. It is a big moment for the children to enter the room seeing how beautifully it is decorated.

The adults have set the table the day before and covered it with a big silk cloth, and the children can only sense and wonder, what is underneath the cloth?

The day starts with free play together and with preparing our food for the meal. Most of the children want to help with the food, but they swap between playing and helping and it is a wonderful mood in the room, working and playing side by side, both equally important.

Slowly it is time for tidying the room before we have our morning circle with all the songs we have been singing for the last weeks and everybody knows them by heart. After ending the morning circle and washing our hands we find our places around the table and everybody goes silent

Now the big moment arrives. One of the teachers is playing the harp and two teachers are slowly lifting the silk cloth on the table and everyone is holding their breath, taking in the beautiful sight of the table with all the growth from the soil.

The teachers tell a story, using all the fruit and vegetables on the table, about how Princess Pineapple gets her Prince Melon, and they live happily ever after.



After the story we all sing the song:

" The earth nourishes the little seed, the sun ripens grains for bread, dear sun and dear earth, thank you both for your treasures on our table."

The meal can begin, and we sample everything on the table. We have plenty of time and we never spend as much time at the table as when we have this festival.

After the meal is finished, we play outside for the rest of the day. During the following days we eat the leftovers and make a soup in a big pot on the fireplace in the garden.

Over the next couple of weeks, we observe the children in wonderful free play and how they connect to the rhythm of nature during the year, whether they play outside or inside. They apply the harvesting and cooking into their play, and we can sense the joy and the impact the mood of a festival has and as teachers and parents we feel gratitude towards the earth and the rhythm of the cycle of life.

Eldbjørg Gjessing Paulsen was born in 1951 in Trondheim, Norway. She founded Stjerneglimt Waldorf Kindergarten in Arendal, Norway in 1984 and worked for many years as a kindergarten teacher. She was representative for Norway for twelve years in IASWECE. She spends time mentoring early childhood educators in Cape Town, South Africa, every year.