



BENEFITS OF FAMILY GROUPING INFORMATION SHEET

Interest in the potential benefits of multi-age grouping has increased steadily again in recent years. The growing interest is due to a greater focus on the importance of early years development and an awareness of the limitations of 'graded' or 'aged-grouped' education. With the realisation that children's uneven developmental patterns and differing rates of progress are ill-matched to the rigid 'age grouped' system, has early childhood teachers searching for a better way to meet the needs of all students. More and more early childhood settings are implementing multi-age programs because the multi-age model that addresses these issues. Did you know that the two largest centres for training in excellence in early childhood development (Lady Gowrie and One World for Children) run long day care centres that are solely family grouped?

Think back to when you were a child. Where did you play? Who did you play with? Did you have siblings - how many siblings? Who did you look up to? What were your favourite games and who taught them to you? Who taught you important aspects of life? Did you have one or more siblings? Did you probably spend most your free time with neighbouring children? You probably didn't realise it at the time, but if you answered yes to any of the these questions, your life and your childhood development was enriched and enhanced for the better by the presence of children of different age levels and abilities.

One of the most attractive aspects of family grouping is that everyone benefits from the experience. Older children learn to be leaders, teachers and carers of the younger children. Similarly, quiet or reserved children can also find younger children with which they can show confidence and self-assurance. If you're a fan of the seven habits of highly successful people (Stephen R. Covey, 1986), than you will understand that we learn and remember much faster when we teach another person something we have learnt.

Equally, younger children also benefit from their older role models. Children mimic each other and learn most effectively through play. It is well known that within mixed age settings language development is significantly enhanced through the interaction with older children. We challenge you to think about this: Even though we try hard to give as much 'one on one' attention to a child as possible, when we also attend to the daily rhythms of nutrition and hygiene of children in our care, how can we possibly compete with the enthusiasm and attentive care a young 3 year old will show to a one year old?

Some parents, especially those of very young children, are concerned about safety issues associated with children of mixed age groups and in some cases such as in art and crafts where older children use scissors, or handle small objects that could be choking hazards to younger children; this concern is valid and in all such circumstances children should be separated for these activities. Statistically however, the majority of incidents are actually lower between mixed age groups than same age groups. Picture a group of children aged between 1-2. Within this group there are a number of children who have just started to walk and there are also a number of children who are now confidently walking. Since at this age level children love action and reaction and take great joy in pushing each other over, those learning to walk behind those confident walkers are likely to experience some extra challenge! Similarly within this same age group, children are now beginning to actively engage in communication, but since their language skills are limited; these children often experience high levels of frustration. Imagine a large group

of children all experiencing similar levels of frustration at the same time. Now I ask you – how might the interaction between a 1 year old and a 3 year old differ? Do you think a 3 year old would experience the same joy in pushing a little one over? How about communication and frustration? A 3 year old might actually understand and/or even help a younger child struggling with language. At this age empathy and understanding has dramatically increased. It never ceases to amaze me how my nearly 4 year old daughter manages to understand and translate almost all of the needs and desires of her ‘adopted’ brother/friend Jarrod who just turned 2. Half words, even grunts are no challenge to her at all. She understands him explicitly.

Obviously, there is always a possibility for an unintentional harm that a ‘larger’ child (such as the 3 year old I just described) might cause to a 1 year old. This could happen if a child were to run into another child, trip or fall onto a younger/smaller child. This concern can nevertheless be addressed by careful management of the environment and careful supervision of certain activities. Younger children should be allowed spaces to crawl or walk free from high traffic areas of older children. Running across such areas should be restricted and discouraged not only by good supervision but by the set up of the care environment. Other areas for potential mishap include swings, slides, tumbling, climbing and other gross motor activities which can also be closely supervised, as they equally would be in ‘aged-grouped’ settings, to ensure that larger children do not hurt younger children.

Finally another important benefit of mixed age groups is that it facilitates the ability of siblings to spend time with one another and to support each other’s development within our centre. New children settle quickly with the support of siblings, whether they be older or younger. Children can also carry on their play and development experiences such as new songs, stories or games learned within the centre, into their homes.

We sincerely hope this document has helped you understand a little more about family grouping and its benefits. At Smartie Pants, we aspire to provide a balance between mixed aged grouped and ‘age grouped’ activities. It is for this reason we have the core part of our day within a ‘age-grouped’ settings and the start and finish in a family grouping environment.

In summary, we hope to achieve the following during our mixed aged grouping times:

- At least 5 hours of effective, developmentally stimulating and encouraging mixed aged grouping time.
- Empowerment of our team by providing support, professional development, leadership opportunities, and shared decision-making.
- Teams to collaborate and communicate frequently, and there is an increase in skill development among staff.
- Provision of adequate materials, resources, and space exist to create and support a multi-age environment.
- Commitment to allow consistency to children with the staff who manage their development and program.
- Use of a variety of instructional techniques and implement developmentally appropriate practices in the multi-age classroom.
- Children of mixed ages and abilities are actively involved in learning and progress at their own pace. Cooperative learning is evident, and students work independently as well as in group settings.
- Older children to have the opportunity to demonstrate helpfulness, leadership, patience, and tolerance. They model social and academic behaviours for younger children.
- Teachers, students, and parents develop a meaningful relationship by sharing common experiences over a long time. Parents become involved in all aspects of the multi-age program.
- Authentic assessment techniques and qualitative reporting methods are used to assess student development, plan future instruction, and communicate with parents.

Buddy Program: Coming Soon

In the coming months we also hope to implement a ‘buddy’ program between our Kinder Aged Children and our young ones. Each Kinder child will choose a younger buddy or buddies for a short time every day. During this time the children will have the opportunity to tell their buddy or buddies a story, read a book or teach an activity to them. Buddy time will be short and sweet to ensure both children have fun and stay attentive to one another.