

Start Small Stand Tall

The benefits of small for your child's early education

Early Years education is a topic of much discussion up and down the country and for many parents choosing the right Pre-School or School that will meet their child's particular needs isn't an easy task.

It is well known that quality pre-school provision can enhance learning, development and school readiness for all children but what are the special benefits a smaller pre-school can provide?

Speen Pre-school in Buckinghamshire is a good example, taking just 20 children; staff critically have the opportunity to spend longer in conversation with children. Staff time is taken up on individualised activities with staff responding quickly during play, taking their lead from the children rather than having to set larger group activities in order to manage. This extension of play leads to a focus on educational activities without the child necessarily knowing that they are 'learning'. Even simple but essential activities like encouraging children to put on their own shoes and coats is much simpler in a smaller setting.

All staff members are able to build relationships with parents and carers and with less time spent managing behaviour there is a focus on engagement, mediation and co-operation. Children form strong bonds between their peers as well as with the staff.

Children that are anxious, sensitive and/or shy flourish particularly well in this small secure environment. One example is that of a young boy who joined the Pre-school at the age of 2. Tracey Winfield, Leader continues: "When he joined us he was very withdrawn. He would not join in with the other children and was a reluctant talker. Over time and with our encouragement he has flourished". His parents view is that the "small setting has given him the time and space to feel comfortable, with professional staff support he now has the confidence to express himself, never being stifled by too many children". He is now confidently moving onto the village infant school.

The children of Speen Pre-School largely move on to the village's local infant school, another small setting. This transition is eased very effectively with teaching staff from Speen Church of England School visiting the Pre-School and the children from both settings joining shared outings.

On moving on to Speen School in the Nursery or Reception class children settle well in to a warm, inclusive and nurturing environment that quickly becomes familiar. Smaller class sizes enable teachers to really get to know the children and establish what is best for each individual and ensure all receive support to achieve their full potential. This was highlighted in the school's latest Ofsted report: "Pupils flourish in this happy, safe and secure environment"

Speen School's results at KS1 regularly exceed the national standard. With a maximum of 60 pupils at any one time, they currently boast an impressive teacher to pupil ratio of 1:13.

This is emphasised by a parent citing: "Small class sizes are a huge benefit and allow children to grow in confidence. Many activities include the whole school, which creates better bonds with children outside their year group. I am amazed at how much they have progressed. Thank you".

Parents have more frequent access to staff & receive regular informative feedback on their child's day. Small working groups enable the children to create strong bonds within the school community.

A parent of a particularly shy child commented on how this small environment has helped him develop: "My son is really blossoming at Speen School. He was a shy boy that found a simple 'hello' difficult. His teacher came to me one day to tell me his hand went up in the classroom for the first time – we both knew it was an important milestone".

The school offers a varied and stimulating curriculum enriched by many outdoor learning opportunities which also includes a wealth of activities including music, gardening, film and cooking clubs, tag rugby, football, tennis, cricket and athletics. Teachers at Speen School agree "The opportunities that all of the children have to fully participate in a variety of activities adds huge value to their small school experience. The children develop a lasting respect for one another through shared responsibilities with different year groups."

Children leave the combined education of Speen Pre-School and Speen School at the end of KS1 having a sense of enjoyment of life, achievement and play, equipped with confidence and skills as they embark on the next stage of their school life, often in a larger environment.

Dr Lucy Russell (clinical psychologist at Everlief [www.everlief.co.uk]) also concurred "Being in a small environment often feels a bit like being at home, which can ease the transition into pre-school or primary school for those children who are more anxious and might experience high stress levels in a bigger, noisier environment."

"A smaller environment with high staff to child ratio potentially offers more opportunity for difficulties to be identified and addressed early in a child's education. It can allow for a more personalised approach to meeting individual needs such as shyness, thus helping children to feel that they are valued and supported."

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The Department for education summed up the benefits of small educational settings in December 2011: “research findings from England show that in smaller classes, individual pupils are the focus of a teacher’s attention for more time; there is more active interaction between pupils and teachers resulting in more pupil engagement.”

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