



Education

$6 \times 2 = 12$   $1 + 3 = ?$



# PLAYSCHOOL

## LEARNING THROUGH PLAY



**P**LAYGROUPS HAVE AN ESSENTIAL ROLE TO FULFIL, as they provide a time for children to play and interact with their peers. The time spent provides an important aspect in a child's acquisition of much-needed social skills. Children with special needs can also benefit from spending time in a playgroup, but it can often be quite challenging to locate a suitable playgroup.

"We have found that there are centres dealing in remedial intervention for the school-going aged child. There are also centres specifically for children on the autistic spectrum, but there is a gap that needs to be bridged for children with special needs from ages two to six years, who to date, have been 'falling through the cracks,'" says Stacey Levin, founder of Sugarplums and Sweetpeas, a playschool aiming at bridging this gap.

"What happened to the days of children being allowed to just be children? Many interventions currently available require that a child receive endless hours of learning at a table with minimal time centred on play and social skills. How natural is this process, especially for children so young? While not criticising any particular therapy, having seen the benefit of various therapies, I strongly urge parents to make sure that their children's therapies and playtime are in balance," she adds.

Stacey has over five years' work experience in the special needs field, and she has spent much of her training observing how other trained professionals or institutions deal with special needs children. She received training from Autism Partnership (AP), a leading and global agency in the treatment of Autism, based in Hong Kong, where she also received "hands on" training from internationally renowned doctors and consultants in the field of Autism. She holds a BA (Hons) Psychology and is currently doing her Postgraduate Certificate in Inclusive Education.

"Playschool is about providing a child with the opportunity to play, learn and develop friendships in an environment that provides fun and interactive play activities. Our playschool is also about giving children the quality one-one-one support and care they need," adds assistant Deena Ress Watkin, who holds a diploma in Early Childhood Development from the College of Cape Town. She too has had five years' experience working one-on-one with special needs children.

"Our philosophy is allowing children to learn and grow through fun and play. For children with special needs, a small teacher-to-child ratio is essential so that each child receives the personal care he/she deserves," says Deena.

So, what kind of children would benefit from such an environment?

"We believe that children with Asperger's, Autism and developmental delays in the areas of communication, cognition and socialisation would gain a lot from this type of environment. Children who could benefit from our playgroup are those children who have deficits in social interaction and symbolic play skills. Children who need assistance paying attention, and with compliance, communication and social skills," explains Stacey.

But, how would one know from as young as age two that a child requires a special-needs playschool?

"A paediatrician should be able to make a sound judgment on any development that's gone awry between 18-24 months of age, and Autistic behaviour must be present before the third year of life for the diagnosis to be valid," says Stacey. "In my experience in the case of Autism, there are two different pathways involved in detection. In the majority of cases, there is a clear developmental delay. The symptoms generally appear in the child's first year, although parents may only retrospectively recognise them. The most common first symptoms to be noticed include failure to look at other faces and the inability to gesture and engage in pretend play. The second route involves regression, where the child's development was initially on track and then the child loses previously attained skills, most commonly language development is gained and lost."

In older children, parents can be cautious and look out for traces of impairment in social interaction, impairment in communication and restricted and stereotyped interests and behaviour. It takes a special kind of teacher and play environment to nurture children with language delays, auditory processing delays, and challenging behaviours. Every child deserves to feel heard and appreciated, and with playschool teachers and a tailor-made environment, parents can make sure to start off on the right foot, helping to develop their child's full potential. For more information, please visit: [www.sandsplaygroup.co.za](http://www.sandsplaygroup.co.za). 

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