

learning through play

SmartKids is a progressive early childhood centre that provides solid preparation for life in an international community. **Liz Ledden** speaks with founder Yoko Otter-van Zuijlen about her ideas, vision and philosophies on early childhood development.

The first thing that strikes me upon touring SmartKids' colourful, cheerful facilities with founder and general director Joke Otter-van Zuijlen (known as Yoko) is its highly organised nature. Immaculate without being too sterile, everything from the storeroom and large kitchen to the children's play facilities appear spotless, of high quality and well thought out. A great deal of care and passion are obviously behind the design of SmartKids, which is situated in a quiet An Phu compound with a second branch nearby.

Desks are absent here. Instead, each room has a central, communal table and various brightly bedecked play areas. SmartKids focuses on positive behaviour and learning through play. The vibe is definitely a positive one—the children seem happy, content and well behaved. The staff spends one-on-one time with each of them outside of group activity.

A holistic approach

Yoko, a Dutch expatriate, describes herself as a pedagogue, which she explains has nothing to do with teaching. Rather, it refers to a more rounded approach to early child care, where attention is paid to all developmental areas, not just academics.

"The centre focuses more on personal, emotional and social skills," Yoko explains. "We don't want to work on academics before a child is confident and happy. They need to feel secure, know what they want and be able to express themselves before starting school."

The children at SmartKids are constantly learning, though through fun, interactive activities rather than a regimented



Photo by Niam Quam

curriculum. Yoko's approach uses the methodologies and philosophies of Reggio Emilia, Steiner and Montessori, which are combined with the depth of experience and qualifications that she and her staff bring to the class. Yoko has a Masters degree in early childhood development and has worked with parents and children for over 25 years, including extensive work teaching special needs children, counseling parents and establishing childcare centres.

Seeing a need for an English-speaking childcare centre of an international standard, she opened SmartKids in 2006. "I wanted to bring something new to Vietnam," she says. Though Yoko speaks seven languages, she explains that she wanted the school to be strictly English-speaking to prepare children for international schools, both here and elsewhere in the world.

The global melting pot

Children from 18 months

through six years old attend SmartKids, with kids under three year olds separated from the older children. Currently, there are 160 children enrolled at the two campuses and 30 different nationalities represented. Yoko tries to ensure cultural diversity in each group by limiting each nationality to a maximum of four per group. The children attending SmartKids are indeed a diverse lot, hailing from English-speaking countries like the United Kingdom and the United States to countries such as Bangladesh, France, Sweden, Korea, Mexico and Poland.

Kids of mixed Vietnamese heritage are able to attend, but issues with the school's 100-percent foreign ownership license means Vietnamese children have been unable to enrol. Yoko says that the laws are currently changing, and as soon as she's allowed to offer spots to Vietnamese children she believes they will be snapped up.

"Some Vietnamese families

want their child to attend an international school," she explains, referring to the increasing wealth and international mindset of many locals. "But if they go to an international school at age six with no preparation, it can be difficult."

SmartKids does indeed seem to serve as a precursor to life in an international school, with children learning to mix with others of different backgrounds. A broad range of holidays and festivities from Easter to Hanukkah are celebrated, and the children dressed up in traditional Vietnamese outfits for Tet.

In it for the long haul

In the future, Yoko says she would like to keep the family-like concept. She prefers to open new branches rather than expand the two existing campuses. Staying abreast of new developments in child care is on the agenda, as well as holding workshops on new approaches.

"The world is changing, children are changing, so we need to be flexible and keep ourselves up to date," says Yoko. After 13 years in HCM City, she is keen to stay on, and will perhaps even retire here.

But for now, the progressive pioneer of early childhood learning clearly relishes her hands-on role—not only does she manage SmartKids, but actively participates in the children's activities. During our interview, she spoke with some of the children and knew them all by name. It's this passion that sets her centre apart.

"What makes SmartKids so different is our philosophy of a more holistic approach," says Yoko. "It is so important to have a positive start." 