

CO-EDUCATIONAL PRIMARY SCHOOL EDUCATION

Inclusive, real-world, family-based education

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Choosing what primary school to send your child/children to is an important decision to make with lots to consider. Primary school provides an important foundation for high school and for life – so you want to make a good one.

When my wife Shelley and I made this decision for our three kids: Thomas, Francis and Josie, we looked for a school that offered quality education, encouraged critical, independent thinking and embraced and celebrated diversity.

We both attended co-educational primary schools, and believe this contributed significantly to our being able to relate well to, and work effectively with members of the opposite sex. So we felt strongly that the school needed to be co-educational. I feel even more strongly about it now, and hope that after considering the following you will feel similarly.

Single-sex education does not mean superior academic education at primary school level.

During several discussions over the years with fellow parents, I have picked up what seems to be a free-floating belief that children from single sex schools perform better academically than those from co-educational ones. The implication of this is that sending your child to a co-educational school could compromise their academic performance. This is a free-floating notion that I believe needs to be sunk.

While there is research that suggests that this may be the case at secondary school (due to an escalation of “attraction distraction” and other issues around adolescence) this is not the case at the primary school level. At primary school, academic performance is very much dependent on the quality of the academic program offered by the individual schools themselves.

My three children are all currently studying at University, and from looking back at how they performed academically during high school, and at how they are performing now, I can see absolutely no evidence whatsoever that they have been disadvantaged academically – if anything quite the contrary. The same applies to many of their friends and peers who also attended co-educational primary schools. So don't buy into the myth that by going the co-educational primary schooling route you will somehow be doing your children an academic disservice – because you won't.

Co-educational primary education offers real world education in a way that single sex education cannot.

While academics are obviously important, academics and education are not synonyms, and it is in the broader aspects of education that I believe the single-sex primary school model falls woefully short.

I have always believed engaging with a wide range of people makes for a richer and more interesting life. While you may or not share this sentiment, the reality of our globalised modern world has made the ability to relate to and work effectively with diverse groups of people an essential 21st century skill. Diversity includes people of different ethnic groups, religious persuasions, sexual orientation – and pertinent to this discussion – members of the opposite sex.

Single-sex primary schools (by definition) exclude a category that includes roughly half the population. Given this, I cannot see how they can come anywhere close to preparing a child for living and working in a vibrant and diverse modern world than can their co-educational counterparts.

I have seen the benefits of co-educational primary schooling in this regard first hand. All three of my children adjusted easily to the co-educational nature of University life, and are able to work comfortably and positively with members of the opposite sex – something I have no doubt will continue into their adult working and social lives.

Co-educational primary education is holistic, family oriented education in a way that single sex education cannot be.

If you are a parent who is considering splitting your son/s and daughter/s by sending them to different single-sex primary schools, my plea to you is to think very carefully about the consequences this may have for your family.

The pressures on modern family life (many of which you are no doubt experiencing first hand) are intense, and are leaving families more disconnected and fragmented than ever. These include high divorce rates, both parents having to work full-time jobs to keep their families afloat, the over-scheduled busy lives of children and rampant technology determined to persuade us that our digital lives are more important than our real ones.

However, the fight-back against this onslaught is encouraging, and perhaps no more apparent than on the Internet, where numerous strategies and activities aimed at fostering strong, healthy, happy family lives can be found.

These range from eating together as a family, celebrating birthdays, establishing family traditions, prioritising family holidays, exercising together and many more. As even the abbreviated list above suggests, there is a massive emphasis on the importance of shared family activities. This shouldn't be surprising, as it is through shared activities that shared memories are created, and shared memories are the glue that binds people (and families) together.

Split your children by sending them to separate primary schools, and you and your children will miss out on a wealth of precious shared experiences and memories. What you will get instead is the logistical nightmare of having to juggle your limited time and energy between at least two (and possibly more) schools – and I believe your family will be the poorer off for it.

Boys who go to co-educational primary schools grow up to be weak, soft or naff – really?

I am going to conclude this piece in the same way that I began it, by doing my best to sink what I believe is another very questionable free-floating idea. This is the belief (probably mostly held by fathers) that sending sons to a co-educational primary school will somehow cause them to grow up to be weak, soft or naff, and most likely a combination if not all of these three.

Well, both my sons went the co-educational primary school route, and neither has ever been described in this way. During high school, my youngest, Francis, played defence in soccer, and was often assigned to man mark the most physically intimidating striker on the opposing side. This was because he is hard, uncompromising and fast - and he seldom came off second best. But he is also kind, gentle, empathic and compassionate – as is his older brother Thomas – and if these aren't qualities you would like to see in your son perhaps you need to revisit your notions of what masculinity should look like.

Like most people, I have made some good choices and some not so good choices in my life, but I have also made a few smart ones. If you are considering what primary school to send your child to you have an opportunity to make a really smart choice too - send them to a great co-educational school – send them to Epworth!