



Parent Educator Succeeds in Combining Ages

Sally Sutton knows about marshmallows and bricks. She also knows about suitcases. That's because she has been trained in Parenting Now!'s *Parenting: The First Three Years* curriculum and has adapted it for use with one group of parents with children of varying ages.

"I was looking for the basics for my families. *First Three Years* had the developmental part," Sally explains. She is the Care Coordinator for Children for the Jackson County Department of Health in Sylva, North Carolina.

"The sales manager thought maybe another curriculum would work better because it was developed for multiple ages. I just went back to, no, I want them to know developmental things."

"I took *Parenting: The First Three Years* and combined the separate years into a 10-session class that covers all three ages. I have all different ages of parents, social status, economic status, and they all flow together, they participate. I wanted something a little different than what we had used before. I love *First Three Years*!

"It is working very well to have three age groups in one class. I go through each age group with the curriculum provided, using the developmental spotlights. I use other resources, both local and from places like ZERO TO THREE.

"Even if someone is there with a 2-year-old, I still give them the infant information. And some games and main points carry over from being an infant to being 2." Sally also uses the videos that accompany each age's lesson, showing them to all the parents. The weekly themes resonate with the parents, no matter the age of their child.

"We used the marshmallow and brick exercise (about parenting styles) to talk about what makes a family work." Sally says the parents began to consider the model of a tree, with firm roots but flexible branches.

"You could see their heads turning and we talked about where they came from, and some shared their home life was not so good. One thing a woman said was there was yelling and she doesn't want to have that in her home. I remembered the training I received for *First Three Years* – to be a good listener, let parents take control of where they want to go – and we had a good discussion."

Another exercise has the group members “packing” suitcases with the values and beliefs they want their children to take with them when they become adults. “In fact, when I learned the exercise in training,” Sally laughs, “I said, ‘I gotta go back and repack my daughter’s suitcase!’”

Before starting the group, Sally had a phone consultation with Parenting Now!’s training manager to make sure combining curricula for multiple ages would work. “After I developed my agenda, we went through all 10 sessions and she gave me notes and suggestions.” Sally’s group agenda is available [here](#).

Sally works with 10 adults in each weekly group. She worked hard on recruitment because the group was not mandated. [Read more](#) about how she filled her group and how she encourages their weekly attendance.

Her group is funded by three area agencies: Southwestern Child Development/Smart Start, Jackson County (NC) Health Department and Family Resource Center. Sally says, “I wrote the grant to get this, but everyone put in their funds and resources where they could. We needed it here. When I wrote the grant, my director said she’d love to see us be a leader in parent education.

“Having the group meet at the Family Resource Center means we can offer a light meal and time for the families to mingle and the kids run around,” Sally explains. “We have child care for the older children, and then we go into the classroom and have our sessions.”

A recent session was all about language. “I kept emphasizing words, words, words – that the parents can expand their children’s language abilities,” Sally says. “It carried over into a discussion about playing. I talked about things in the home that can be toys and brought in some examples. Then we closed with singing and games that the curriculum emphasizes.

“It’s really good, really fun.”