Tony answers some questions about this issue, which is important for many parents:

**Q** What is a composite class?

**A** Children who start school in the same year are usually put into the same class. This class could be “parallel” (mixed ability) or “streamed” (extension, average, or remedial ability children grouped together). Each year, most of the children are promoted to the next year (grade), while a few will repeat the year. After seven years, most children head off to high school.

At most primary schools, some children who started school over a range of years are put into a class together, hence the name “composite” class. In small country towns there is sometimes no alternative to having a composite class that covers up to seven years. More commonly three years are combined. In more populated areas such as the Central Coast, the class usually has two year groups combined, but sometimes three.

**Q** How much difference is there between, say, a Year 3 and Year 4 class?

**A** After the first five years of a child’s life, development is not as rapid as before, occurring in stages that take several years. That is why schools now consider children in Years K, 1 and 2 to be in Stage 1, children in Years 3 and 4 to be in Stage 2, and children in Years 5 and 6 to be in Stage 3. (This two-year grouping extends right through to Year 12.) Curriculum documents that outline what, how and when knowledge, skills and attitudes in different subjects (Key Learning Areas or KLAs) are to be covered are also organised in these stages.

**Q** Do children in a composite class ever miss out on important coursework?

**A** A teacher of a Year 3 class will prepare a teaching program that looks a lot like the teaching program of the Year 4 class, and the composite 3/4 class. It will be a Stage 2 program. In KLAs like Human Society and Its Environment (HSIE), a school usually allocates topics or themes such as Transport and Exploration to a stage (let’s say Stage 2). Transport will be studied in 2006 by all children in Stage 2, and Exploration will be studied in 2007. In this way, children will cover the same course whether they are in a straight class or a composite class, or indeed if they swap from one to the other. The activities in each theme need to be of sufficient range and flexibility to address individual learning needs.

**Q** How does the teacher of a composite class cater for the needs of children over such a range of ages?

**A** Firstly, keep in mind that in a straight parallel class, the age range can be up to eighteen months, as some children start school before they turn five years of age while others don’t start until they are six. The ability of the children within a straight class also varies enormously. It is common in a Year 4 class to have some children with a reading age of 7 and some with a reading age of 13. In other words, all primary school teachers have to cater for a range of ages and abilities of the children in their class.
Each curriculum document specifies what a “typical” child will achieve by the completion of a stage. All primary school teachers need to be very well organised in providing activities for the “non-typical” child, who needs to move through the curriculum at a faster or slower pace. This applies especially to Mathematics and English, and some schools group children of similar ability just for these subjects.

**Q Are there any advantages or disadvantages for a child in a composite class?**

**A** Research confirms that there is no academic disadvantage for these children. Some schools actually create composite classes, even when they don’t need to, for the educational, social and emotional benefit of children. These classes are also called “multi-age”. Older children in a composite class can develop maturity and consolidate their learning by being role models and peer tutors for the younger children in the class. The younger children can develop more rapidly by having these interactions with older children.

It is important that the children understand why they are in a composite class, lest they feel like a failure, or even suffer teasing. It would not be wise to have older, less able children in a class with younger, more able children. The school also needs to organise opportunities for children in a composite class to mix with their same age peers in formal and informal learning and playing situations.