
**“It’s Just an Amazing Place to Be”:
An Exploration into the Community at
Artemis Place Society’s Young Parent Program**

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Introduction

Artemis Place Society aims to “provide holistic social and emotional support” to women and trans-youth who are completing their high school education in an alternative learning setting. In addition to the school, the Young Parent Program and on-site daycare provide “an enriched early childhood experience to infants and toddlers of young parents while modeling care-giving skills” for parenting students.¹

Artemis Place’s daycare currently accommodates babies and toddlers up to three years old, but is working on expanding its license to include children up to age five. The interviews which inform this paper were conducted to gain an understanding of the current state of Artemis Place Society’s Young Parent Program, as well as explore participants’ opinions regarding the future expansion of the daycare.² This paper was written with support from two current Early Childhood Educators (E.C.E.) employed at Artemis Place (Shirley and Marta), two current mothers at Artemis Place (Emma and Sarah), and one graduated mother (Abigail).³ The process was overseen by Daycare Coordinator Heather Kay.

The following paper will outline four themes found in the interviews: Artemis Place Society as unique; the strength of Artemis Place Society relationships; personal growth experienced by Artemis Place Society community members; and the future directions of Artemis Place’s daycare. This research was commissioned by Artemis Place Society to explore the current state of the Young Parent Program and to help inform the daycare’s future directions.

Artemis Place Society as Unique:

“Going above and beyond” to support to students “in pretty much every possible way

Artemis Place Society offers young women and trans-youth a safe and supportive space to complete their high school education, and for young mothers, a Young Parent Program and on-site daycare as well. All of the mothers who were interviewed discussed the importance of having access to alternative education: Abigail stated that

In all honesty I’m not sure where I would be if I didn’t have that alternative option. Because I’m not sure what the process would have looked like going through a regular high school pregnant. Do they keep you? Do they not? Are they even allowed to do that? It just raises a lot of questions. So it was nice to have that security of school. So I did stay there for the [full] length of time.

Students arrive each morning and work on their own coursework with the help of teachers and teaching assistants. Though one mom noted that students have to have a lot of self-discipline and self-motivation to complete schoolwork—rather than spending their time socializing with other students—she stated that she “absolutely” felt supported by the Artemis Place staff on both the school and daycare sides. As Shirley explained, each student, mother, and child is an individual and therefore has individual needs; Artemis Place Society caters its programs to each student to help everyone achieve success. For the mothers especially, this support in balancing getting an education while raising a young family is possible largely due to the unique structure of the daycare itself.

“It’s just an amazing place to be. If I didn’t find Artemis Place I wouldn’t be graduating. I don’t know where I’d be. It’s an amazing program.” - Sarah, student

¹ Mission statement found at <http://artemisplace.org/about/>.

² This research was conducted by students at the University of Victoria, enrolled in the 2018 Sociology 438 cohort. This Community Engaged Learning course facilitates relationships between students and not-for-profit organizations throughout Greater Victoria. The three students who collaborated with Artemis Place Society were tasked with researching the experiences of staff and families in the Young Parent Program and their visions for the daycare’s future. This information was gathered through a set of qualitative interviews conducted with two current staff members, one past mother, and two current mothers. The in-depth interviews were recorded, then transcribed and coded. This paper is the final result.

³ Please note that the names of mothers and their children have been changed to protect participants’ identities and confidentiality.

Artemis Place Society's childcare currently offers subsidized daycare during school hours for approximately ten children aged two months to three years whose mothers attend the secondary school. The daycare operates on a primary caregiving system, meaning that a staff member will typically work with the same group of children throughout the child's entire stay at Artemis Place, from infancy through toddlerhood. The daycare currently occupies a spacious room at the front of the school, with a kitchen, nap area, play space, and a large outdoor yard.

The most important structural feature of Artemis Place Society is having mothers and their children in one place. To the moms, it is important to have their children down the hall because they feel more comfortable knowing that they can be with their child whenever necessary. For the staff, it is one of the key reasons why they love their job: both Shirley and Marta mentioned that what is "so special" about Artemis Place is the chance to develop deep connections and strong relationships with both the mothers and their children, and even sometimes with the grandparents or fathers as well. Marta lamented that at other daycares the staff only build surface-level relationships with parents: they drop their child off and do not return until the end of the day, only allowing for brief conversations and connections between staff and parents. But at Artemis Place, the moms and tots are a unit, making it a "really more holistic way to work." Even the other students who are not parents seem to enjoy having the daycare on-site, often asking to come visit. Marta attributed the other students' excitement to enjoy the space to the fact that "there's a different aura about being in there than in the rest of the school"; in her opinion, the space helps visitors feel mindful, connected, and grounded.

TEAMWORK: AN ESSENTIAL TOOL FOR SUCCESS

The staff demonstrate exemplary teamwork and dedication. Prior to having high chairs, the daycare workers would pair up to feed their children. Shirley would sit and feed one or two of the infants on her lap while Marta watched the other four. They would then trade off until all of the babies had been fed.

As Shirley stated about the process, "We're partners, and we help each other out with our kids. We just kind of go with the flow and...communicate and just try to get things done."

"[Artemis Place] just kind of feels like a second home."

- Emma, student

In addition to the mothers feeling appreciative for having their children so nearby, the moms expressed extreme gratitude for the multitude of resources that Artemis Place's Young Parent Program offers. Both Emma and Sarah mentioned how helpful it is that the daycare staff make lunch for the children each day, and were excited that nutritionists come in and discuss how to make healthy eating part of their and their babies' lifestyle. Sarah also discussed how the program organizes visits by dental hygienists to check the children's teeth, visits by bank employees to help the moms develop their financial literacy and open R.E.S.P. accounts for their kids, and other visits from professionals in the community. These resources are in addition to general advice given by Artemis Place staff and free information pamphlets, which all really "help with everything" and makes Sarah feel successful in supporting her son. All of the mothers mentioned that the daycare staff truly go "above and beyond" in their role: for example, helping getting the families to a doctor when the child is sick, finding resources such as food banks when the family is low on food, and even helping to find other suitable daycares for the children once they age out of Artemis Place's program. Emma also cited "Moms Group"—a weekly meeting for all student-mothers to discuss their experiences and learn practical parenting skills—as "really great!"

The combination of having an alternative learning setting, on-site daycare, and a plethora of parenting resources really helps to "open doors" for all of the moms. This support is further compounded by the amazing relationships developed at Artemis Place.

The Strength of Artemis Place Society Relationships: "It's just a really big family and I think we all get something out of that"

Perhaps the strongest relationships developed at Artemis Place's Young Parent Program are those created between the staff members and the mothers.

Because the mothers and their children are both on-site at Artemis Place, the daycare staff have the ability to interact and communicate with the mothers at any point in the day. The staff members at Artemis Place work tirelessly with the children in the daycare, but also provide emotional support for the mothers as well. The Artemis Place employees' efforts go beyond the requirements of the standard school system: as Sarah explained, the staff "are looking out for your best interests on a personal level." The connections between the staff and mothers are strong enough that the young moms often feel comfortable sharing personal information with the E.C.E. employees. As Emma stated, "Even if I just need to talk to someone, there's always somebody available."

"Relationship...that's the whole point of this program."

- Marta, Early Childhood Educator

However, offering emotional support is not the only way in which staff members "go above and beyond." The mothers provided countless examples of staff taking time out of their own lives to make sure the young families at Artemis Place are properly cared for. One mom recalled that when her child was sick and she did not have a way to get to a doctor's appointment, a staff member from Artemis Place drove her and her child to the doctor. Similarly, Sarah—who is about to graduate—shared that she was having difficulties finding a new daycare for her son Gavin until a daycare staff member drove her around to help her find a new one. The Artemis Place staff take on much more than their job description entails, but as Marta stated, "Everybody [here] works from the heart and that's what these moms need."

The staff's hard work does not go unnoticed by the students: every mother that was interviewed commented on the immense support they felt from Artemis Place employees. As one student explained, "The staff [bend] over backwards for you." The way in which the staff members support the young mothers helps foster deep and meaningful relationships. Many times after a mother and her child have moved on from Artemis Place they stay in touch with the staff members whom they have created connections with. As one young mother stated, "[The staff members] are like family."

As previously mentioned, the Young Parent Program staff prefer to work on a primary caregiving system. By working with the same children as they progress through infancy and toddlerhood, the staff members are able to build close and rewarding relationships and connections with each individual child they care for. As Shirley exclaimed, it feels "meant to be" when she builds a close relationship with a child.

The primary caregiving arrangement is not only ideal for the staff and children, but also for the mothers. As Marta explained, the fewer staffing changes a family experiences, the easier it is for them to build trusting relationships. Many of the mothers are leaving their babies at extremely young ages and this separation can be stressful. For Sarah, leaving her son, Gavin, with someone else at eight months old was difficult: the Artemis Place staff were the first people other than herself to care for her child, but the staff's support helped Sarah overcome her worries. At twelve months old, Gavin was using sign language—taught to him by the Artemis Place staff—to communicate, making Sarah feel extremely proud.

The relationship between staff members is also important to recognize. The nurturing environment at Artemis Place is largely due to the teamwork of its staff. The teachers, counsellors, and Young Parent Program staff all work closely together to make sure that the students are a part of a positive school environment. However, the teamwork between staff members does not only positively affect the students: it also creates a rewarding and inclusive work environment. As Shirley stated regarding her coworkers, "It's just a really big family and I think we all get something out of that."

STUDENTS SUPPORTING STUDENTS

The girls at Artemis Place help and support one another on a daily basis and it does not go unnoticed. As one staff member recalled, one of the young mothers has twins and endures the daily struggle of bringing in her two babies along with all of their gear. However, just about every morning there is a group of students right by her side helping her complete this task. Shirley stated, "If she was by herself in a different daycare, in a different environment, I don't know if that would happen." But because Artemis Place is able to foster such close relationships with its members, no student goes unsupported by their peers.

Personal Growth Experienced by Artemis Place Community Members: Facilitating “an incredible amount of learning” for the whole community

Due to the unique atmosphere and programming at the school, Artemis Place offers an environment of growth—both academically and personally—for all those who belong to its community. Sarah expressed that “you feel loved here, and you grow here,” referring to the warm, caring relationships that students and their families build with the staff within the Young Parent Program. The interviewees discussed four major types of growth one experiences at Artemis Place: the personal growth the mothers experience; the development of the babies and toddlers enrolled in the daycare; the personal and professional growth of the staff members; and the impact of the daycare’s presence on non-parenting students as well.

The people and resources available to young mothers at Artemis Place allow them to not only excel academically, but also to further develop their parenting skills. Young mothers benefit from the guidance of Artemis staff in an environment where the staff see the whole picture: the students’ lives as both new parents and young people working to get their education. Some young mothers enter Artemis Place with a history of struggling academically, and benefit from having an alternative option that offers a supportive environment where they can complete secondary school while pregnant or parenting. As Abigail stated, “You want to better yourself to better your child,” and indeed, the support offered at Artemis Place allows for help with bettering oneself even beyond a student’s time at the school. “I was more comfortable exploring my options and I didn’t feel that I was limited by having a son so young,” Abigail noted. Artemis Place Society helps their students to discover what they can do after high school, assisting with post-secondary applications and ensuring all young parents feel confident in their next steps.

The personal development that occurs at Artemis Place as students learn about academics and parenting in tandem contributes to a unique experience which allows the young mothers to flourish. Sarah explained, “It’s really pushed me forward in life. I feel like if I didn’t find this school, I wouldn’t be as successful as I am, and I *do* feel successful.” The moms interviewed indicated that

they feel like successful parents who make better decisions due to the guidance they receive at Artemis Place. Participants also indicated that their time at Artemis Place has helped them to build trusting and loving relationships after experiencing their own trauma and attachment issues in their youth: Sarah confided that “I’ve learned to love these people, and so has my son.” The school also helps students to develop strategies for successfully navigating transition periods in their life. Sarah discussed being scared to be apart from her son at first, but the staff helped her to slowly overcome this fear and become comfortable leaving Gavin in the daycare while she completed schoolwork.

It is not just the parents who must adjust to being away from their children. Kids in the daycare also learn how to be with adults other than their parents, and the E.C.E. staff help them in making this transition. All of the young mothers interviewed brought up the amount of growth they have seen in their children since they began at the daycare: the kids are highly social; they are learning communication skills such as sign language and songs; and as they get older are even being potty trained.

GROWING UP AT ARTEMIS PLACE

Artemis Place offers a place not only for its students to thrive, but also a safe community for children in the daycare to develop as they grow from babies to toddlers. As Sarah explained, her son Gavin has grown up and learned to communicate while being looked after by Artemis daycare staff.

“Gavin feels loved, he feels safe. He’s growing fast, he’s learning. When he was a year, he started communicating with sign language because of the daycare showing him. He’s grown so much through the school. He’s such a bright boy and he loves going here.”

This example demonstrates how the Artemis Place daycare plays an integral role in the positive development of the children in their community.

However, the school does not just benefit its students and their children. The daycare staff at Artemis Place have also experienced significant personal and professional growth throughout their multi-decade careers at the school. In the interview with Marta and Shirley, Marta revealed that “it’s an incredible amount of learning” and has always filled her personal need and desire to grow. Each having their own backgrounds in childcare before

joining Artemis, Shirley emphasized, “You can’t stop growing here because every situation is different. There is no typical day. Every day is different. Every child’s different. Every mom is different.” In this way, the variety of people and situations the staff encounter keeps the job interesting and engaging. Although Shirley and Marta have spent many years in their jobs at Artemis, there is constant learning that keeps their time in the community fresh. As Shirley explained,

We’re both still here, so we are getting something out of it! Just that relationship that you form with the parents and the children, it’s really special. It’s not something you’re going to get anywhere else, I don’t think, because the students—or the parents—are younger and looking for some guidance and we’re their first contact with daycare and someone else taking care of their child that is not them, so it’s really special.

Additionally, the staff also see how having young parents and their children in the school helps other [non-parenting] students to gain perspective on “how hard it is to have babies!” Students who might not otherwise witness the challenges new parents face are able to experience first-hand the day-to-day choices and sacrifices new mothers must make, thereby granting them a different perspective on parenting and motherhood. This environment helps to develop students’ empathy and what Shirley calls “a giving side” by helping out the young mothers at Artemis Place. The opportunity to develop this perspective is unusual for a high school—again, drawing attention to why Artemis Place is “really special.”

Future Directions of Artemis Place Society’s Daycare: “Opening doors for so many more individuals”

A major theme that emerged from interviewing participants about the possibility of expanding Artemis Place’s daycare to include three-to-five year olds was an enthusiasm for the young mothers who would have new opportunities to complete their secondary education. Sarah emphasized how an expanded daycare would “open the doors for so many more individuals who need this type of care and community.” The mothers who were interviewed expressed feelings of gratitude towards the programs offered at Artemis Place, explaining that the support they receive should be extended to other young mothers in the community. Abigail elaborated, “I think it

it would help by opening the door for other students and give an opportunity to other pregnant teens who are...motivated to graduate. It would allow others to get their foot in the door and get the support that they need.”

“I think the connection, the relationships that are built here, the level of... unconditional support this place has... Our counsellors, our teachers, they just work from the heart. Everybody works from the heart and that’s what these girls need.”

– Marta, Early Childhood Educator

The staff also expressed their general support for the daycare expansion: “I think it would be nice to be able to support them for longer, because in the past we’ve seen [some] moms having to move on with their children way too early and they weren’t quite ready to take that step for whatever reason.” Marta continued by explaining, “I’ve kind of always felt like when they leave here [the transition] is just so, so big...they have to do so many things that they don’t have to think about here, and it’s overwhelming for them.” This sentiment demonstrates not only the level of care the staff take with their students, but also the recognition of how difficult it is to transition out of the Artemis Place community as a young mother. Obtaining a license to keep children past the age of three would allow young moms to stay in Artemis Place Society’s programs until they are ready to move on, rather than forcing a transition before the mother is ready. Shirley explained, “I think some of our students [have] had to move on because their child has outgrown the [daycare] centre, but they haven’t outgrown the program.” Expanding the daycare to accommodate mothers with older children would allow for the flexibility in catering to individual mothers’ needs; as previously stated, “every mom is different” and this individualized support is part of what makes Artemis Place unique.

Despite the generally positive attitudes towards accommodating older children in the daycare, there are some logistical challenges that will need to be addressed, such as student motivation, staffing, resources, and the new daycare space itself. While there are many benefits to increasing the daycare age limit to five years old, there are several other factors to consider. Some participants had mixed feelings about allowing the possibility of having two extra years for moms to finish their education: “[My child aging out at three years old] was the kick in the pants I needed to get my butt in gear and graduate, because if that’s what I wanted then I needed to move it,” stated Abigail. Adding extra years for the daycare could be beneficial for some mothers, but may have a negative impact for those less motivated to graduate. With the support of Artemis Place staff, a careful balance would have to be found for each mom and child, allowing them to spend the right amount of time in the program for their family: not requiring that they move on too soon, but also helping to motivate mothers to finish their schoolwork.

Another key theme that emerged was the need for additional resources for, and consultation with, the Artemis Place staff prior to the expansion. The three mothers who were interviewed all recognized how hard the staff work to “go above and beyond” for their charges, while working with limited resources. Participants advocated for more help for the staff at Artemis Place, as well as hiring a few more staff members to provide relief if ever there is an emergency. The staff who were interviewed confessed to feeling the physical exhaustion of working with babies and toddlers for years on end. For example, it was only ten years ago that Artemis Place got highchairs for the daycare, finally reducing the need for staff to continually lift children for feeding. In the event that older children require care at

EXTENDING OPPORTUNITIES

Young mom Sarah discussed her ongoing desire to bring new young mothers into the community at Artemis Place and help them to feel included: “Anytime a new student is here, I’m like, ‘Come sit with me, this is an amazing school!’” Sarah’s enthusiasm for Artemis Place was so strong that she struggled to find words to describe the impact the school has had on her and her son. When asked about what Sarah would say to any student thinking of enrolling in the school, she took a few moments to reflect and just replied with one word: “**Come.**”

“I think some of our students [have] had to move on because their child has outgrown the [daycare] centre, but they haven’t outgrown the program.”

- Shirley, Early Childhood Educator

Artemis, the staff interviewed agreed that it would be nice to have the choice of which age group they would prefer to work with. For example, Shirley expressed the desire to remain with the zero-to-three year olds, whereas Marta welcomed the idea of switching between the younger and older groups every few years in order to have a break from the physical work of constantly picking up babies and toddlers.

The logistics of expanding Artemis Place’s daycare must also be further explored. A recurring theme among participant responses about the proposed new daycare space was the need to develop the *right* space in order for the daycare to be a success. The room currently under consideration for the three-to-five daycare is not favourable to those interviewed, for reasons such as not getting enough sunlight and not having easy access to the outdoor play space. Another question is the viability of scheduling outdoor play time, bathroom breaks, and other licensing stipulations; babies and toddlers (and their caregivers) require the flexibility to move around freely, which may prove difficult with the introduction of a set schedule to accommodate older children.

It is also important to those interviewed that the children accepted into the daycare are only kids of mothers connected to the Artemis Place community (as opposed to outside families). Having children who are dropped off and picked up at the end of the day who lack a connection to Artemis Place could prohibit the staff from developing strong bonds with both the parents and their children. However, the staff and students interviewed all expressed the positive impact that a three-to-five year old daycare license would have on the relationships between Artemis Place families and staff members; having more time to build relationships between the staff, mothers, and their children would help in creating a safe space for families to learn, grow, and develop in.

CONCLUSION

In closing, our research shows that there is general support for expanding the Artemis Place daycare to allow three-to-five year olds into the childcare program. Doing so would offer the potential to “close the gap between when teens are pregnant and having their child,” offering young mothers more flexibility in their education according to their individual needs. Sarah elaborated, “I think [being able to stay at Artemis Place longer] would better moms like me, and it would help us feel safe—having our kids in a place where we are too.” With strategic planning in accordance to the feedback outlined above, obtaining a daycare license that would allow older children to remain at Artemis Place would help to support mothers while they navigate the challenges of being both a young parent and high school student.

Artemis Place Society offers a community like no other for young mothers living in Victoria. According to Sarah, attending Artemis Place is “one of the best decisions you could make.” The unique structure of the school and daycare, and the relationships and growth one experiences while there are unparalleled in any other conventional school or daycare setting. As Emma stated, “Without [Artemis Place], I don’t know what my family would do.” The community that has been created at Artemis Place has changed the lives of countless students, children, and staff, with participants attesting to the positive—and integral—role which the Society has played in their lives. To support Artemis Place Society and their Young Parent Program is to recognize the organization’s devotion towards bettering the lives of the students, children, and staff, and supporting their roles as contributing members of the Greater Victoria community.

“[Artemis Place] is a self-pace program with supportive staff who look out for you and your child’s best interest...there is a daycare on hand with incredible staff who bend over backwards for you and I would highly recommend looking into it and seeing if it’s a good fit—because you want to better yourself to better your child.”

- Abigail, past student