

The Backyard Gang



Emma Sharrock (Fd 02) has lived in Hong Kong since she left university and co-founded The Backyard Gang in 2018. It's an all-year-round programme which encourages young children to get out and about and be free – having exciting adventures, building friendships, and creating memories.

We interviewed Emma to find out more and were delighted to hear her thoughts...

Firstly, what are your memories of Uppingham?

I think my fondest memories have to be on the sporting field. Come Tuesdays, Thursdays or Saturday afternoons – that's where I was happiest whether it was hockey, netball, tennis or athletics. It was so much fun going to and from fixtures and I developed some great friendships at Uppingham. I guess it was my love of sport and all that it comes with that has ultimately led me to where I am today.

What was your favourite subject and who was your most loved teacher?

My favourite subject, in fact the only one I really enjoyed, was PE and I think I have the whole PE department to thank for that starting with Miss Horrex and Mrs Singlehurst then moving onto A Level PE with Mr Johnstone and Mr Gutteridge.

Where did you start your career?

My whole working life has been in Hong Kong. I moved out here a couple of weeks after leaving Uni and spent 2-years in the sports marketing and events industry before moving into sports coaching. It was there (Multi-Sport) that I met my now business partner, Chris. After a few years working together, we decided to branch out on our own and the Backyard Gang was born!

Is there anything you learned at School that has been invaluable in your success so far?

I think the independence that I gained at school, as well as the self-management skills that I developed, have ultimately contributed to my success so far. That, as well as the leadership and communication skills I gained through playing team sports massively helped me with my confidence and gave me the motivation to push myself into the career of my choosing.

Have you always been involved with outdoor adventure?

Not in a business sense, no – but I've always had a great love of the outdoors, with fond memories of beach days, puddle jumping, den building and rolling around in the dirt when I was younger. In fact, the whole programme that we've put together for BYG is drawn entirely from our old childhood experiences. We're taking the kids out and, in a sense, reliving our own childhoods through the experiences that we're creating with them. That's what makes it so special, and why I think parents respond so well to it as it resonates with their own childhood memories.

What planted the seed for The Backyard Gang? And how long was it from concept and ideas to opening the doors?

The whole concept came about organically. A group of parents that we knew asked us to take the kids out on an adventure one afternoon – they went out in the mountains, hiked through streams and came back filthy and wet but with huge smiles on their faces. It was then we realised there was a huge market for this type of thing in Hong Kong and that no one was doing anything like it. Chris did all the initial hard work in creating the concept, logos and pillars of learning and once that was ready to go, we started our first Gang (one group per week) and it's just grown from there - we now have 5-6 different groups going out per day! I'd say it took about a year of trialling various ideas until the business was set up ready to go.

What have been your greatest and also your toughest moments?

The toughest part of the job is probably having to be across everything. We're a small company and it started with just two of us which meant we had to learn every single part of the job as we went along. It's been a steep learning curve, but I now feel like I have a good all-round knowledge of running a business (although there's still a whole lot more to learn!). The greatest part, and what makes us the most proud, is how well the Backyard Gang has been received. We had no idea that it would be anywhere near this popular when we first started out and it's just continuing to grow purely through word of mouth which is amazing!

What skill-set do you think you need to become an entrepreneur?

I would say the biggest things are organisation and drive. If you're organised and eager to learn and succeed, you can do anything!

What do you enjoy most about working for yourselves?

The flexibility is amazing. We're able to schedule everything in and around our own personal lives so we have the best of both worlds. It also means we're able to be as creative as we like and constantly come up with new sessions and trial new ideas without anyone saying, 'no you can't do that!'.

What does a typical day at The Backyard Gang involve?

I usually spend mornings in the office dealing with the operations side of the business while the team are out delivering our Ed Services programme in schools. Late morning/lunch time we're busy trialling the latest crazy idea whether that be playing with bubbles, getting the tools out to make something out of bamboo or testing out things to cook over the fire. Afternoons are then spent out at Explorers (3-4 years) and Gang (5-9 years). We have our own session plans to follow, and activities change weekly but this term we've been making boats and sailing them in the streams, going on wildlife hikes, creating tie-dye t-shirts, making fresh lemonade, using tools to make marble runs and cooking in our homemade outdoor pizza oven. It's such a fun job (mainly because we're able to just be big kids) but we often have to pinch ourselves to check that what we've created here is actually real!

If you could give one piece of advice to your 'school self' what would it be?

Stick to what you enjoy – life's too short to be doing something you're not interested in. Find your passion and go out and pursue it. Don't be afraid to take risks – if it's for something you love, it'll always work out and be worth it in the long run.

