

Making Multi-Age Groups Work

The differences in abilities, skills, and interests in a multi-age group exude the feeling of a well-orchestrated symphony. Everyone belongs and has a significant role in creating the harmony in the room, while the caregiver, as conductor, establishes the rhythm.

The caregiver's job changes significantly in a multi-age group. Planning for the "fours" is not useful, but planning for four-year-old *Jessica* is essential. The focus on each child's unique developmental needs drives the program.

Infant/Toddlers

Infant/toddler multi-age groups work best if the groups are small — a maximum of five children per caregiver with only two under 18 months old. The age span of the

youngest children should ideally mimic nature — babies at least nine months apart in age (i.e., a three month old and a twelve month old), with the 18-36 month olds spread across that range.

Managing the day is made easier because all of the children are not awake and doing the same things at the same time. The infants are sleeping part of the time that the toddlers are playing, while the toddlers' naptime gives the caregiver the opportunity to give special attention to the babies.

At some point, everyone is awake. A calm environment, created by the caregiver's patient interactions with the children, sets the tone for the way the children play. When the babies are on the floor, the toddlers are reminded they are there. The toddlers

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may sit on the floor to play with the babies, or they may play around the babies, with toys that are soft and flexible. The caregiver watches for times when the toddlers demonstrate care and empathy toward the babies and then reinforces their concern. She uses their emerging self-help skills to encourage their independence and to enable them to assist her.

Brent, an 18 month old, selects his favorite book about cars and trucks. Marisa, nearly three, is “reading” to Ms. Wells as they sit on the rug near the book shelf. Brent takes his book to Ms. Wells and says, “Cars!” Ms. Wells smiles, patting the pillow on the other side of her. “Marisa is reading now. Would you like to sit with us while she finishes, then we’ll read about the cars?” Brent, clutching his book, nods his head and cuddles on the pillow to hear Marisa read.

Four month old Noel, in his infant seat near Brent’s pillow, begins to whimper and squirm. Brent immediately slides off his pillow, toward Noel. Ms. Wells asks Marisa to continue her reading while she changes Noel’s diaper. She tells Brent that Noel will be fine . . . “he just needs his diaper changed” . . . and invites him to come with her, but he settles back on his pillow. She completes the diaper change, washes her hands, and rejoins Marisa and Brent, holding Noel on her lap as Marisa reads. When Marisa finishes reading, Ms. Wells asks if she would like to hear Brent’s favorite book. Marisa says “Yes.” Brent beams and hands his book to Ms. Wells.

Flexibility is the defining attribute of the infant/toddler multi-age caregiver. She will be balancing a six month old on her hip while helping a toddler put on a smock. She will be using her voice to soothe an infant in distress while tying a toddler’s shoelaces. She will plan the day so that the activities requiring the closest supervision of the toddlers occur when the babies have been fed, diapered, and are quietly content. Similarly, she makes time to cuddle and coo over each baby while the toddlers are engaged in quiet play or are napping.

Learning each child’s likes, dislikes, temperament, and abilities allows the caregiver to become sensitive to behavioral or physical changes in each child. The capacity to respond to children’s cues — to recognize when a child is tired or overstimulated or bored or hungry or wet or about to be wet — is key to success in a multi-age infant/toddler group.

Preschoolers

The preschool multi-age group is a laboratory of developmental differences. Some three year olds will have some of the same physical capabilities as the four

year olds or will exhibit enough language proficiency to express themselves as well as some fives. Some fours and fives will still be developing skills that one might expect of younger children.

It is because of these inconsistencies in development that children can thrive in a multi-age group. The younger children will often follow the lead of older children — using new language, practicing new routines, trying new skills. The older children will develop more helping and caring behaviors. They will often take the initiative and coach younger children in the procedures and routines of the room.

The caregiver’s role is to plan activities that are challenging and interesting for the older children and challenging but not frustrating for the younger children. She knows that three year olds like to dress up like the adults they know best — mother and father — while the older children like to be teachers, office workers, and firefighters, complete with props. She also recognizes that the older children may want to perform tasks for, assign less mature roles to, or control the younger children.

Megan, age four, enjoys dressing up and being “Mommy.” She always wants three year old Justin to be her baby because he is the youngest in the group. As the children are choosing their activities, Megan says, “I’m going to dress up like a mommy.” Ms. Newman asks, “What will you do when you’re all dressed up?” “I’ll go shopping for food,” replies Megan, “and I’m going to take my baby with me.” “Which baby doll will you take?” asks Ms. Newman. “I’m going to take a real baby,” answers Megan. “Justin is going to be my baby.”

Justin immediately speaks up. “I don’t want to be a baby.” “Megan, what else can Justin do since he doesn’t want to be the baby?” Ms. Newman asks. “I can sell the food to Megan,” replies Justin. “I want Justin to be the baby,” whines Megan. “I know you do, but he doesn’t want to. He has decided to be the grocer. What else will you do when you go to the housekeeping area?” asks Ms. Newman. “I don’t know. I’ll decide after I start playing,” replies Megan.

Younger children’s participation in activities with older children may change the nature of the experience for the older child. The caregiver has to decide when it’s appropriate to encourage older children to include younger children in their play and when it is not.

Three year old Marlin is playing in the block area with Keisha and Anthony who are four and five. Marlin has built a simple garage for a wooden car he enjoys playing with. Keisha and Anthony are building a structure that is almost

waist high. Marlin sees their work and wanders over to watch them. Mr. Todd notices Marlin's interest in the older children's structure.

Keisha eyes Marlin and immediately discourages him from joining her and Anthony. "You build baby houses," she says, "we build skyscrapers." Marlin stands his ground. "I don't build baby houses. I build garages." Mr. Todd assesses the situation and considers if he can develop Marlin's growth to a higher level of block play. He thinks about encouraging Keisha and Anthony to include Marlin, but then reconsiders. Marlin is not at their level of skill with the blocks . . . including Marlin may not only hamper their creativity, it may also be frustrating to all three of them.

Mr. Todd decides to take some instant photos of multi-level garages on his way home. The next day, he and Marlin look at the pictures and talk about different kinds of garages.

Transitioning from Straight-Age to Multi-Age Groups

The change to multi-age groups is a gradual process, best accomplished through attrition within a room or when a vacant room can be enrolled with all new children. The latter can occur either through expansion or when the two year old group turns three, moving to preschool and leaving an existing classroom vacant or when the five year olds leave to go to elementary school.

The most likely scenarios in which these changes can occur are:

Scenario I — Attrition occurring within a straight-age group. In this scenario, children who leave are replaced by children of complimentary ages. For example, in a group of four year olds in which three are leaving, two three year olds and one five year old could be enrolled. In a group of 12-18 month olds in which one is leaving, a two year old could be enrolled.

Scenario II — A group of twos turning three is ready to move to the preschool program. The children can be spread among the existing four year old class(es) and five year old class(es).

Each of these rooms will then consist of threes and fours or threes and fives. The "missing" ages in each room are filled in as openings occur. The existing three year old room is maintained, with fours and fives added as threes attrition out. The now vacant two year old room is filled by infants and toddlers from the waiting list.

Scenario III — The five year olds in a straight-age group all go to elementary school. Here is an opportunity to create a whole new multi-age preschool class with threes, fours, and fives from the waiting list, even while the change from straight-age to multi-age groups is progressing more gradually elsewhere in the center.

Making the Case with Licensing Officials

In many states, multi-age groups require a variance from or waiver of one or more of the licensing standards. Some states have provisions for obtaining these; but even if a state's regulations do not address exceptions, it should not be assumed that waivers or variances are not allowable.

The key point to underscore with licensing officials is that the request for the variance or waiver comes not from the desire to do something wrong but from the desire to do something right.

Preparing the case for multi-age grouping includes the following steps:

- Identify all the standards that apply to multi-age grouping. Address each separately, clearly stating the conditions of the waiver/ variance.
- Provide a program description that includes justification for the request.
- Include research, literature reviews, or references to other successful multi-age program models that outline the developmental benefits to the children.
- Be specific about how health and safety issues will be addressed.
- Describe backup coverage for infant/ toddler multi-age groups.
- Define any terms that might not be clear: multi-age, primary caregivers, constant care, etc.
- Describe how the benefits to the children will be evaluated.
- Secure letters of support from respected early childhood professionals.
- Include other attachments such as videotapes of multi-age groups.
- Consider requesting the waiver/ variance for a

specified period (preferably three years) as a “pilot” with the understanding that a positive assessment by licensing officials at the end of the term will result in a permanent exception.

The Economics of Multi-Age Groups

The impact of multi-age groups on a center’s bottom line can be forecast by looking at current enrollment and child:staff ratios. For many multi-age preschool classrooms, the effect will be minimal. The restrictions on the composition of infant/toddler groups is likely to have a more noticeable effect. For example, a program that enrolls 14 infants (0-12 months) with three caregivers and 18 toddlers (13-36 months) with three caregivers would be reduced from 32 children to 30, creating six groups of five infant/toddlers, each with its own caregiver.

Two high-demand, high-revenue spaces will be lost. But all the revenue for those spaces will not disappear. Some can be recovered immediately by instituting a multi-age fee which extends the current infant fee to toddlers. Applying a multi-age fee to the preschool also will generate additional revenue from the parents of fours and fives.

Other cost offsets will be realized over the longer term. Parents or third-party funding sources will pay more for what they quickly see as better care. Enrollment will be more stable, with parents less likely to disrupt their children’s long-term attachments. Caregivers will become more invested in the children because they are with them longer. They will perceive their jobs as more challenging, interesting, and rewarding, resulting in greater retention.

The economic underpinning of multi-age groups is added value . . . a compelling reason to move forward.