

Tip Sheets

Meeting the Needs of Multiple Ages in Family Child Care



Children may experience the benefits of an early childhood program setting with a group of children of various ages—including

infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-age children. This is most common in family child care, but may also occur in classrooms with a smaller age range, such as three- to five-year-olds, grouped together. In a mixed-age setting, children can form meaningful relationships that build a community among children, caregivers, and parents.

Benefits of Mixed-Age Grouping

Family-Style Environment

Many children are raised in a family with older and/or younger siblings. Having this familiar family-style experience of multiple ages in the care setting helps enhance a child's sense of trust and comfort. Mixed-age grouping also benefits children and families because children from a single family can remain together in the care setting over time.

Opportunities for Cross-Age Learning

Mixed-age grouping exposes younger children to the knowledge and abilities of the older children in the program. Children can observe, emulate, and learn from the activities and behavior of older children, which is typically beyond that which peers could provide. Older children learn by teaching and gain a sense of responsibility for other people.

Caregivers do not need to force children to play together, but can simply provide the opportunity to interact with older or younger children.

A Positive Social Environment

In a mixed-age group, younger children are more likely to participate in more advanced activities than they would if they were by themselves. "Children need opportunities not only to observe and imitate a wide range of competencies, but also to find companions among their peers who match, complement, or supplement their interests in different ways."

Providers can help create a positive social environment as older children interact with younger ones. Young children who are nurtured by older children are more likely to emulate these actions when they eventually become the older children.

Continuity of Care from Infancy to School Age

Familiarity with a caregiver helps children of all ages develop confidence and trust. Mixed age settings allow children to stay with one provider over an extended period of time. This is especially important for infants and toddlers.

Challenges of Mixed Age Groupings

Caring for multiple ages can present challenges for providers. Providers must:

- Understand/promote expectations across the developmental spectrum for a range of ages.
- Address children's individual needs and differences, no matter the setting in which they are working with mixed-age groups.
- Pay close attention to the strengths and challenges of each child and relate those to the appropriate indicators.

- Remember that child development varies greatly across the early years, and children will not develop skills/capabilities simultaneously.

Using ECIPs in Mixed-Age Groupings

Using Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs) to observe, document, and plan curriculum for each child will help obtain the benefits of mixed-ages while overcoming the challenges.

ECIPs are listed across domains and age groups so providers can identify where a child is presently performing and what's next in their development. Observation, documentation, and planning related to ECIPs is essential. Mixed-age caregivers should:

- Observe children as they care for them.
- Record observations as necessary as a point of referral when relating it back to ECIPs.
- Use this documentation to assist with planning education experiences for the children.
- Utilize the different domains as a guide to plan activities that build skills for every child regardless of age and skill level.

Single-age groups can create pressure for children to reach certain milestones. The above steps will help providers recognize and care for each child as an individual with unique capabilities while unifying indicators across ages of the children in their care.

Planning Appropriate Curriculum

Providers must plan and implement developmentally appropriate curriculum based on each individual child as well as the program's curriculum goals. This includes:

- Developmentally appropriate methods such as play, small group projects, and cooperative learning to help children develop curiosity, solve problems, and make decisions.

- Creating and implementing meaningful integrated learning experiences using children's ideas, needs, interests, and culture.

Multi-Age Environments

To create a learning environment that meets needs across the age ranges consider:

- Safety for all ages served.
- Play and quiet spaces that provide options for a variety of developmental skills and needs.
- Space for infant and toddler motor exploration.
- Open-ended materials/learning experiences.

Open-Ended Experiences

Open-ended experiences offer many materials, play, and learning opportunities that address varying goals. This strategy helps with curriculum planning for mixed-age groups because multiple children with a range of skills can be successful in individual ways. On the contrary, when experiences address only one specific goal, children may succeed or fail, leading to more frustration.

Additional Resources

How to Care for Infants and Toddlers in Groups
<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/77-how-to-care-for-infants-and-toddlers-in-groups>

Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs)
<https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/early>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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