



Caring For Children In Mixed Age Groups

Healthy Children, Strong Families, Caring Communities

Handout #22



This handout discusses:

- Child care for different age groups
- Activity Planning

Special Opportunities

Family child care home settings provide opportunities for several different age groups to be cared for at the same time. Most experts agree there are many benefits to this type of child care. Educator Lillian Katz in *The Case for Mixed-Age Grouping in Early Education* (NAEYC) 1993, feels that in these “family units” younger members observe, emulate and imitate a wide-range of skills. Most younger children are not equally mature in all areas of development. Older children can offer leadership, tutoring experiences and may assume some of the responsibility for less mature and knowledgeable members. She also feels there are greater opportunities for children to develop friendships with others who match, compliment or supplement their own needs and styles.

Children need a sense of community that includes people of all ages, interests and skills. This support enables them to grow into healthy, socially-skilled adults. They can learn empathy, patience and they develop a healthy self-esteem while helping others.

On the business side, caring for several children from different age groups at

the same time is a good way to help providers maintain full enrollment. In addition, many families looking for child care for school-age children want to keep all their children together.

Meeting the Challenges

Providing child care for children from several age groups can be a great challenge – especially to a new provider. For instance, what do you do when two babies are crying at once? What if a toddler wants to get into the game the “big kids” are playing? Or how do you respond if the “big kids” want to kick a ball where the pre-schoolers are playing? Through trial-and-error child care providers have come up with great suggestions. In every discussion of caring for mixed-age groups, most providers emphasize *planning* and *organization*. They feel that having a routine and planning how the day should be organized are critical factors for success.

Organizing for Care

1. Don't jump into taking the maximum capacity of children you are licensed for right away – start slowly.
2. Put the babies together with supervision. They are fascinated with each other's faces and behavior.
3. Look for a family that fits into the current group. Consider your own philosophy and compare it with their views on child-rearing.
4. Have a two-week trial period to look at the children's ages and temperament to see whether they all get along together.
5. Educate yourself about child development. Learn what is developmentally appropriate, what kinds of behaviors are typical at certain ages and how to handle children during their different stages of growth. Resources for child development materials are

available in the student library of the local colleges. You may want to enroll in early childhood education classes for a more thorough understanding of child development.

Child Action, Inc. offers free workshops throughout the year on child development and their resource library contains videos, books and handouts.

- Plan enough space so each age group can be on its own while you remain available to supervise.

Planning the Environment

Set up play areas and environments for all the ages in your care. Use barriers when needed, such as safety gates, big pillows or furniture. Use barriers sparingly and for short periods of time. You should include an infant or crawler in the group whenever possible.

Consider:

- Holding an infant on your lap while older children are using scissors or working on crafts
- Using an empty wading pool with toys in it to separate babies from rough and tumble play or placing your own body between the two age groups
- Planning different types of activities to meet the needs of each age group
- Having crawlers play on the floor while older ones play board games at the kitchen table
- Doing some activities with older children while others nap
- Having an art activity or a box with all the materials needed for pretend play organized and labeled for easy storage and accessibility
- Going through the house or center and looking at the room from the child's level. What would the baby see first? What would the toddler or pre-schooler see first? What appeals to the school-age child?

Setting Routines

- Establish a routine that is convenient, works for your group and doesn't take you away from your supervising role
- Include all children in cleanup and preparation for the next activity

- Consider the children's ages, individual needs and interests
- Plan transitions between activities carefully, so everyone gets to the next activity without a rush.

Mealtime Success

- You may have to eat in shifts, feeding infants on demand, settling them down and then feeding the others. But your goal should be to have all the children eating together whenever possible. Family-style meals include an adult sitting with the children, modeling table manners, enjoying conversation and sharing information about nutritious foods. Children will want to eat what others are eating, but be careful you're not comparing one child's appetite or food preference with another child for the purpose of getting him/her to eat.

You might want to:

- Have older children help with food preparation, setting the table, serving younger children or helping with cleanup
- Provide child-sized furniture
- Use high-chairs for the infants and toddlers and utilize "booster-chairs" to adjust for smaller children in regular-sized chairs
- Offer pre-prepared snacks in containers children can open
- Have juice or milk poured or available in small pitchers for a family-style setting.

Planning Activities

Observe all of the children consistently to learn their skills and interests, then plan activities they find fun and interesting. Enlist older children to help with younger children. They can entertain babies, read to preschoolers, put together a play or a puppet show, or teach a board game. Older children enjoy being valued for their input.

Some children really like helping, but be careful not to use all their time helping care for younger children. Being your assistant can be a way for older children to avoid their own age group and a way to escape peer conflicts.

Buy open-ended toys such as blocks, Lego® and other multiple use items that can be used by different age groups.

Alternate and slightly change activities for the different age groups. For example, younger children paint and explore color, while older children use the same paint materials to express their ideas.

Look at mixed-age groups as an opportunity to learn about the different ages, individual needs and interests of all the children in your care. Learn to meet their needs before they become demands. Children develop socially when they have opportunities to observe and play with older children, siblings and adults. They are then more likely to be flexible, cooperative, focused and socially-competent members of a community.

Further Resources

Books and videos are available at the Child Action, Inc. Resource Library. Here are some suggestions:

Books:

- *Active Learning In A Family Day Care Setting* by Susan McCartney
- *Caring For Children In Family Child Care* by Derry Koralek, Laura J. Colker, and Diane Trister Dodge
- *The Creative Curriculum For Family Child Care* by Diane Trister Dodge & Laura J. Colker
- *The Incredible Indoor Games Book* by Bob Gregson

Videos:

- *Caring and Learning: Creative Curriculum for Family Child Care*
- *Dramatic Play: More Than Playing House*
- *Experiencias Creativas Para Antes Y Despues De La Escuela*
- *Nuevos Juegos Para Los Sitios Donde Se Cuida a Los Ninos*