

# Parent Aware Tip Sheets

## Caring for Children in Mixed Age Groups

High-quality programs use developmentally appropriate practices. This means that the practices meet children's needs at each stage of development. Programs for infants are different from programs for preschool children. However, many programs, especially family child care/early education programs, care for children across age groups together. The practice of caring for children from differing age groups together is called 'mixed age grouping.'

### What are the advantages of mixed age grouping?

Mixed age grouping may be a choice or a necessity. Regardless of the reason, the practice does have some advantages.

- Caregivers working with mixed age groups are less likely to have rigid expectations for children's abilities.
- Children have family-like relationships and siblings may be able to be together.
- Younger children are able to observe and interact with older children who have more well-developed skills.
- Older children are able to practice skills when they encourage and interact with younger children.
- Children can stay in the same group, with the same caregiver, for longer periods of time. Minimizing program transitions helps children feel secure and develop trusting relationships.

### What can the challenges of mixed age grouping be?

- **Supervision.** Although mixed age grouping has advantages, it is not easy to implement. When children of different ages are mixed, enhanced supervision is required. For example, toddlers who are unsteady on their feet may accidentally step in an infant. Or an overeager preschooler could try to engage a toddler in a game that the toddler is not yet ready for resulting in injuries.
- **Equipment and Materials.** The environment itself may also need to be arranged to accommodate safe mixed age grouping. For example, toys with small parts that are age appropriate for older preschoolers might be very dangerous for infants or toddlers. Or climbing structures appropriate for toddlers might be uninteresting to preschoolers. Finding a safe and effective balance of equipment and materials that address the needs of children across the age range is a difficult challenge for caregivers.
- **Caregiver attention.** Parents of older children may worry that caregivers' attention will be consumed by the young children who rely more on caregivers for their basic needs. Parents of young children may worry that older children who are more vocal will demand the caregivers' attention. Reassuring parents that all children get the time and attention they need for positive development requires enhanced communication.

## How can you implement mixed age grouping?

The following practices will help caregivers safely meet the needs of all children:

- Plan open-ended activities that safely appeal to a broad range of ages. Activities such as reading, painting, coloring, as well as block play, dramatic play and sand play are safe and successfully promote development for children across a broad range of ages. For example, a toddler and a five-year-old can both enjoy block building. Although they will be able to do different things, and will practice different skills, both children can participate in the activity together.
- Keep materials that are unsafe for younger children in inaccessible containers. Bring out the materials when younger children are sleeping or place them in areas where younger children cannot access them. For example, store small blocks in plastic totes with tight lids. When mobile infants or toddlers are napping, bring out the blocks for use by preschoolers or bring the small blocks to a table that is out of reach of toddlers for use by preschoolers seated at the table.
- Use dividers to separate spaces for children of different ages. Be sure the dividers do not limit supervision. For example, use a low shelf or cushions to create a cozy area for infants to play away from mobile toddlers or preschoolers.
- Use individual or small group activities to build skills. While children are playing, select one or two at a time to work on emerging skills. For example, work with two preschoolers on counting skills while infants are napping.
- Focus on individual children, not on age differences. One of the major advantages of mixed age grouping is the emphasis on individual children's needs rather than expectations associated with a specific age group. Plan activities that address the needs of each child without regard for age.

Mixed age grouping reflects typical family life and allows children to remain in the same group and with the same caregiver for longer periods of time. For this reason, many parents prefer mixed age grouping and many caregivers enjoy the challenge of caring for children of a broad range of ages. Mixed age grouping can be both satisfying and effective when caregivers attend to a few practical considerations and plan carefully for each individual child.