



Department of Early Education and Care

THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

EEC Child Care Licensing

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE: Multi Age Grouping

EEC's new regulations provide an option for multi-age grouping within large and small group and school age child care programs as well as in family child care homes. Multi-age grouping, sometimes called "mixed age" or "family grouping," refers to ten or fewer children from birth through thirteen years old (or sixteen, if such children have special needs) assigned to a single group. This is a new configuration for group care, but it is the foundation of quality family childcare.

There are many reasons why a program may want to implement a multi-age group. Done well, multi-age grouping can enhance social and emotional development and encourage cognitive development for all participating children. Multi-age grouping can be supportive of a wider array of individual development than traditional age-range groupings. It can provide a more flexible and accommodating environment for social and emotional development than traditional same age grouping, and can encourage the development of self-esteem along with skill development. The intent of multi-age grouping is to provide a positive and supportive experience for all participating children.

Enhancing Social Development

Multi-age grouping resembles a typical family structure by including children of different ages. In a multi-age group older members develop leadership, empathy, and responsibility. Younger members observe and emulate more competent, older members. To support social development, educators can:

- encourage younger children to seek help from the older, more "expert" children. This helps younger children learn to advocate for their own needs and allows older children to feel valued and self-confident.
- encourage older children to assume self-esteem, building responsibility and independence.
- regularly review all children's progress and interactions. It is important to intervene if older children find themselves "overburdened" by the requests of younger children. It is never the expectation that children assume the adult's role as educator.
- take a strength-based approach to skill development. Acknowledge different, but equally valid, ways of accomplishing a task. An older child's way of doing something may be more suitable for him/her, but may not be helpful or useful to a younger child. Create opportunities for experts and novices, regardless of age, to cooperate in a variety of tasks, making use of their respective abilities to achieve the goal.

Enhancing Emotional Development

Participating in a group can be challenging. Interacting with others across a range of emotional levels encourages the development of empathy and provides opportunities to experience another's point of view. Multi age grouping offers special opportunities for educators to support emotional development by:

- encouraging sympathy and empathy between children as they struggle with different challenges;
- encouraging children of all ages to offer and accept comfort from each other when they are hurt, frustrated or disappointed. Sometimes there is nothing so effective as a hug or a kind word from a younger child or encouragement from a respected older friend;
- alerting children to the moods and feelings of members of the group. Children can learn to recognize the different ways that others (of all ages) express their feelings. Older children can be role models for younger children as they increasingly express their feelings through words, rather than behaviors; and
- supporting uneven development in individual children who may be cognitively or physically mature but emotionally less developed.

Encouraging Cognitive Development

Multi-age grouping creates frequent opportunities for younger children to learn new skills and ideas, develop questioning and inquiry skills, and stretch their abilities to imitate their more advanced peers. Younger children may experience more social participation and less parallel and solitary play, maximizing opportunities for language and interaction. In general, children become less dependent on adults in the classroom and more reliant on themselves and their peers. To support cognitive development the educator can:

- encourage “experts” (regardless of age) to demonstrate competence by teaching others with less developed skills in a particular area;
- encourage older children to think of ways to include younger children in their activities, such as finding roles for them in their dramatic play; and
- encourage older children with well-developed literacy skills to read to younger children, or children with less advanced skills.

Program Considerations

To make multi-age grouping effective, educators must focus on pro-social behavior, such as cooperation, sharing, turn-taking and inclusion. The curriculum should focus on the skill development and progress of each child, and should minimize competitive behavior. Different rates of development between children and uneven development across domains must be acknowledged and accepted as the norm. In addition, educators should:

- encourage self-regulation and group responsibility. When a child reminds others of the group rules, the rules are reinforced for both parties;
- plan for some time when children may engage in activities with their own age-mates. Balance multiage time with age peer time;

- encourage socio-dramatic play and problem solving as important components of the curriculum. These activities lend themselves to all ages;
- ensure sufficient staff for the ages of children in the group. If any of the children are younger than four years old, a second educator will help the group function smoothly. Multi-age grouping offers an alternative learning environment for children and educators in group settings. It can be supportive of a wider array of development than traditional age range groupings. Flexible, family style grouping can support individual development while promoting a nurturing, caring environment where social problem solving is an embedded component of the curriculum.

Information for this paper was taken from Katz, Evangelou & Hartman (1990): *The Case for Multiage Grouping in Early Childhood Education*. Washington, DC: NAEYC.