

COACH'S CORNER

Coach's Corner is a DIEEC blog dedicated to providing fresh ideas for all early childhood education professionals.



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Multi-Age Learning Environments

By Meghan Pallante

While traveling along your early childhood education journey, you may have come across the phrase “multi-age learning environments.” A multi-age learning environment is defined as a classroom or learning space with children of different ages or grade levels. Typically there is at least a 2 year age span. For example, in a typical Montessori preschool classroom the age of the children may range from 3-6 years.

Family child care homes and Montessori programs have always operated in multi-age learning environments. Family child care programs have the largest age spread with many programs spanning from infants to school-age children in before/after care. Over time, multi-age programs have gained popularity and many center-based early childhood education programs have adopted this model as well. Why? Let's take a closer look at the benefits of these environments, and some tips for making the most of them in your own program.



Benefits of multi-age learning environments

Most of us have been conditioned to believe that learning and development occurs best with a group of peers that are the same age. This is not necessarily true. There are many lessons and moments of growth that can happen organically when combining children of different ages. Below are some of the benefits children may experience in a multi-age learning environment.

- Younger children learn from the older children. Multi-age learning environments provide the unique opportunity for children to learn, not only from their teachers, but also from their older classmates. In a multi-age group of children, you may see a toddler mimicking the play of a preschool child.
- Older children are able to support younger children. This in turn helps develop confidence and patience in the older children. For example, you may walk into a family child care home and witness a school-age child reading a book to a toddler. This experience is special and beneficial to both children.
- When children are placed in a multi-age learning environment, they are typically with the same educator and caregiver for several years. This continuity of care helps children to develop secure attachments. Educators are also able to better support children and their families because they are able to get to know them over longer periods of time.
- Siblings are able to stay together in the same learning environment. This can be especially supportive for children who may have experienced trauma or toxic stress.
- Play becomes multi-dimensional. The children in a multi-age environment will be in various stages of development. Many of the same activities will look different and have different outcomes.
- Language development is encouraged. Younger children are exposed to more complex language in their interactions with and observations of older children.

Tips for multi-age learning environments

There are some things to consider in order to provide a supportive multi-age learning environment. While each program will have their own set of unique needs and challenges, there are a few considerations that are helpful to all programs.

- Be sure to set up your space in a way that benefits all children. If you have infants in your multi-age program or classroom, try to have a safe floor space for them that is in an area where they are included, but protected from the play of older children. It may also be helpful to have a table or space where older children can work on ongoing projects or activities that will be protected from the play of younger children.
- Be mindful of your materials. If there are art supplies or other materials that could be a choking or strangulation hazard, be sure to store them out of reach of infants and toddlers. Plan to provide plenty of open-ended materials that can be enjoyed by all ages. Some examples of these types of materials include blocks, dramatic play materials, and manipulatives.
- When considering your curriculum or daily experiences, be sure that the focus is on individualization. Try to minimize whole group activities and prioritize small group and individual activities. For example, instead of doing a whole group art activity, put out the materials as a choice during free play. This gives children the opportunity to work independently or in small groups.
- Review the benefits of multi-age learning environments with families. This could be a new concept to some families and it will be helpful for them to hear about all of the positive and supportive experiences that will be provided to their child.
- Provide encouragement! Support children in working together during activities. This leads to more of a “community” feeling in the learning environment.
- Keep your schedule flexible. While having a predictable routine is important, we want to be sure to provide flexibility, especially when dealing with multiple ages. The needs of the children may differ from one another and sometimes there may need to be a deviation from the schedule to accommodate a hungry/sleepy toddler or adding some activities during naptime for school-age children who are attending for the summer!

As you can see, there are so many beautiful experiences that can occur in multi-age learning environments. As this type of programming becomes more popular, we look forward to seeing continued benefits and positive outcomes for children, families, and educators. Does your program have a multi-age learning environment? We would love to hear about your experience on our DIEEC social media channels!



Source

- [Using Mixed-Age Groups to Support Continuity of Care in Center-based Programs \(ECLKC\)](#)
- [Examining the Literature on Authentic Montessori Practices: Multi-Age Groupings](#)

Resources

- [Mixed-Age Classrooms in Preschool \(Brightwheel\)](#)
- [Meeting the Needs of Multiple Ages in Family Child Care \(Center for Inclusive Child Care\)](#)
- [Webinar: Caring for Mixed-Age Groups \(NAFCC\)](#)
- [What are Multi-Age Classrooms? A Magnified Look at This Learning Model \(Rasmussen University\)](#)