Working with mixed age groups

Working with a mixed age group provides challenges in many aspects of service operation: including setting up environments, offering experiences and activities, supporting positive relationships, organising the session, and setting rules. However, the rewards and benefits make it worthwhile.

Children today may have few opportunities to be around children younger or older than they are, especially in a fairly informal environment. Managed well, an OSHC service gives children many of the same opportunities that an extended family might provide. Children can learn so much from older children, and older children can gain confidence and satisfaction from the opportunity to ‘teach’ younger children and demonstrate, often to an admiring audience, their skills and talents. In an environment that is supportive, older children can increase their self-awareness through opportunities that come from being around younger children. They may gain some insights into how they used to be when they were younger. They can also come to appreciate the strengths and wisdom of younger children.

When faced with the challenge of planning a program that meets everyone’s needs, it may be tempting, especially if you are used to working with a single age group, to resort to what has been called a ‘one size fits all’ program to cater for diverse ages – that is, a program that caters to some extent for everyone but isn’t rich and wonderful for anyone. This may be necessary to some extent as you establish an environment to cater for individual differences.

Suggestions for planning for a mixed age group:

• Don’t emphasise ages with the children or make them a major feature of your interactions and conversations. Avoid grouping children by ages unless there is a good reason to do so. Also avoid referring to age groups, or emphasising how old children are.

• Consider children’s needs, interests and talents as individuals and as a group. This will enable you to create a program where ages mix, and where age matters much less than if you focus on expectations for children based on generalisations about what is appropriate at different ages.

• Keep in mind that children at any age differ widely and have different individual strengths, talents and interests. Avoid making generalisations or judgments about children because of their age. You may find, for example, a seven year-old who is just as passionate about creating art and just as keen to be an artist as an 11 year-old is, and they may be comparable in terms of their talents and skills. A six year-old may be a talented dancer; an eight year-old may have very accomplished ball skills. Making an effort to match children’s strengths and talents with what is offered in the service will make age a less important issue.

• Offer a range of books, games (computer and board) and puzzles to cater for different abilities. Games and puzzles are examples of categories of equipment and materials that are essential in OSHC services but which are not open-ended – that is, there is a correct or right way to use them. Such games and puzzles need to be available for some children, although their usefulness may not extend to the whole group.

• Think ‘open-ended’ when planning experiences and purchasing equipment. Equipment such as balls and jump ropes can be used in a range of ways. Keep in mind the range of abilities when you organise sporting activities and group games. Offering a rich array of art and craft materials and supporting exploration and innovation encourages many levels of involvement and engagement. Where genuine creativity is valued, children know that there’s no right way, for example, to paint, draw, sculpt, or do collage. Open-ended art and craft projects are a better option than craft activities where everyone is expected to do the same thing to produce an identical product.
• Encourage mixed age projects but avoid making younger children a burden for older children. Don’t overdo the message that they are responsible for looking after the younger ones, but at the same time acknowledge acts of caring and kindness – both ways: older to younger children and vice versa. There will need to be occasional reminders to older children to take care with younger ones, especially in active play, sports or games.

• Plan some activities for different age and capability groups. Older children particularly may appreciate the opportunity to be just with children their own age. Younger children may also appreciate some time when they do not have to compete for adults’ attention, for space, for equipment, for turns with quicker, bigger, more articulate, wiser older children!

• Try to give older children some sensible privileges, but make sure younger ones feel special too. Rules and guidelines exist for reasons, and those reasons typically have to do with staying safe and healthy and showing respect and care for both people and objects. It is reasonable to have higher expectations of older children, to give them greater responsibility, and in exchange for them to have somewhat more freedom than younger children. Acknowledge that it may seem to older children that younger ones ‘get away’ with things more than they do. Help older children to see the trade-off in terms of rights and privileges that they may have that the younger children don’t. Discuss rules with children as a group, so that the rules, and the reasons for them, are transparent. Talk about what is fair, and allow diverse opinions to be expressed. Help children learn to listen, and to try to see alternative views.

• Try to set up a cooperative and collaborative culture among the children rather than a competitive one. One of the many important lessons a child can learn in OSHC is the value, excitement and advantage of pooling energy, talent and effort to achieve things, solve a problem, get something done, or create something wonderful. On the other hand, a competitive culture emphasises deficits in individuals, even though that may not be the intention. Although competition isn’t usually thought of in this way, whenever there is a winner or someone who is best, this necessarily means that others lose and are less than best. This is particularly unhelpful in mixed age groups. It is important to establish a sense of community where everyone is valued and everyone appreciates that each member of the group makes a contribution. Celebrate ‘personal bests’ and other significant achievements by children.

When adults work well with children, both adults and children are teachers and learners. The same can be said of multi-age groups. Children learn from each other, and OSHC services can take full advantage of the mix of ages to highlight and support mutual learning and teaching.

Links to Shared visions

Chapter 2: A vision and way of thinking, pp. 14–17
Chapter 4: A profile of children five to twelve
Chapter 5: Relationships, p. 60

The challenge of older children

Questions and reflections

1. Can you think of some examples of older children teaching younger children? What about younger ones teaching older ones?

2. What particular challenges does your service face because of the mixed age group?

3. Which experiences and opportunities have you found work best with mixed ages? Which ones are the most unsuccessful?

4. What extra responsibilities do older children in your service have?