

Your guide to: Multi-age groups

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Key points:

- The introduction of Pre-Prep may mean your service introduces multi-age groups to accommodate increased hours of Pre-Prep, and up to 15 hours of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten.
- Combining 3- and 4-year-old children into multi-age groups is a way of managing enrolments at your service and can be used alongside other approaches to programming, such as rotational models.
- Multi-age groups provide unique opportunities for children's learning and development and can enhance the social and emotional skills of both age groups.
- Many Victorian services are already using multi-age groups to deliver highly effective programs.

Introduction

In early childhood education, a multi-age group, sometimes referred to as a mixed-age group, is where children aged 3 to 5 years old are combined in the same group.

Historically, children have always lived and learned in groups of children of different ages, both within and beyond their family settings. Building relationships with children of different ages is a valuable skill for participation at school, during play, and in children's wider communities.

Multi-age groups can occasionally create different dynamics in the way the different age groups mix. This can lead to developmental opportunities and teachable moments related to responsibility, leadership, patience, compassion and empathy.



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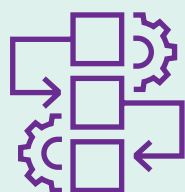
Examples

Irrespective of the ages of children at your service and how they are grouped, the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (VEYLDF) Practice Principle of 'high expectations for the learning and development of every child' is a cornerstone of effective practice.

Multi-age groups have several potential benefits to support high expectations:

- when older and younger children are grouped together, older children gain valuable skills in helping, guiding, and teaching younger children
- play within multi-age groups tends to be more complex which, in turn, supports language development and the development of social skills
- children may be able to learn at a more comfortable pace in a multi-age learning environment, focusing on what they can do. The learning environment may be more cooperative, than competitive
- working across different age groups can provide opportunities for the teaching team to expand their professional practice
- multi-age grouping can allow children from the same family who are close in age to attend early childhood education programs together, if appropriate, which may be convenient for families.





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How you facilitate multi-age groups at your service will depend on advice and feedback from families and your teaching team. It may also depend on other changes you are considering, for example whether you have expanded the overall group size to bring 3- and 4-year-old children together, or if you are moving to a rotational model comprised of smaller groups of 3- and 4-year-olds learning together.

A further consideration is the number of teachers and educators available to work with multi-age groups. For example, you will need to consider whether to employ more staff to support a larger group size, or if your existing team can support 3- and 4-year-olds learning together in smaller rotational groups.

Once you have decided to plan for multi-age groups, begin by sharing your teams' understandings of the similarities and differences between different age groups. Children across the 3- to 5-year-old age range can have differing abilities, but the pedagogical strategies appropriate across these ages are largely the same.

Questions to keep in mind in planning for multi-age grouping:

- How will you arrange flexible learning spaces to cater for a range of learning interests and abilities? Will you provide spaces for the inclusion of all children based on their individual needs, including areas for solitary, parallel and group play? How will you continue to offer learning activities that challenge children regardless of their age? Can you move furniture and equipment around easily to respond to differing needs and interests?
- How will you cater for variation in children's responses to routine activities? Will some routines need to be discarded, or new routines designed? How will you use routines and transition times to support the learning of all children?
- What approach to planning will you take? Will you plan separately for different age groups within the same group? Or will you plan on a whole-group basis, then cater for individual needs within the group, regardless of their age? Any approach should ensure that the teaching team intentionally plan for the strengths and needs of all children across the groups.
- How will you connect with children's learning progressions and make observations about what extension and support is needed? How will you assess children of different ages within the group? Will there be a team member who takes responsibility for each age group? Or will all team members be responsible for assessment of learning and development across the group? Which tools will the team use to guide assessment (for example, [Early Years Assessment and Learning Tool](#))? How will you compare and moderate your assessment judgements alongside those of colleagues?
- How will the teaching team regularly check in with each other about planning for and supporting each child?



Questions for reflective discussion

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The Early Years Learning and Development Outcomes of the VEYLDF apply equally to 3- and 4-year-old children. Expectations of learning outcomes and achievement can differ across age groups, however.

Use the Practice Principles in the VEYLDF to guide you – they describe the most effective ways for early childhood professionals to work together, and with children and families, to facilitate learning and development. You may also use the [Three-Year-Old Kindergarten teaching toolkit](#).

The following reflective questions connect to the Practice Principles with a particular emphasis on the requirements of multi-age groups:

- What are your expectations of children of different ages? Are these expectations shared across teachers and educators? How will you demonstrate high expectations of all children, regardless of their age?
- How will you work with children to establish caring, tolerant, and encouraging relationships between children of different ages? For example, older children can act as 'buddies' for younger children to teach them about centre rules and routines.
- How will you model concern for the wellbeing of all children without positioning younger children as less competent and confident? How will you plan to support children who take a little longer to learn centre routines or who need shorter group times? Consider children in the group with additional needs who may also have similar needs.
- Are the materials that are available to children sufficiently open-ended that all age groups will find opportunities for meaningful play?
- What will this mean for your teaching teams? How might professionals need to work together in new and different ways in teaching multi-age groups?

You can also use the [VEYLDF illustrative maps](#) to help you plan experiences. The maps have examples of evidence you may observe as children learn, grouped according to the key components of learning in the VEYLDF.





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Some families may be unfamiliar with combining age groups in early childhood education settings. They may be concerned that younger children will be overlooked amongst older children, or that their 4-year-old won't be sufficiently challenged amongst the 3-year-olds, for example. You can support families to understand multi-age groups by informing them about:

- the pedagogical strategies you are using to meet the needs of all children, remembering to frame this in language so it is easily accessible for parents and carers
- how the qualifications held by early childhood educators have equipped them to modify their teaching with children across the whole birth to 8-year-old age range. Even in single age groups, the age range may vary so educators are used to identifying specific needs of children and using different strategies to engage and help them develop and learn
- the best way for families to approach you if they want to discuss their child's participation and progress, or any concerns they have about their child
- the opportunities and [benefits of multi-age groups](#).

Finally, consider and decide on communication methods you will use to communicate with families – for example, floor books, diaries, wall displays, emails, online platforms and portfolios. This will help ensure continuity for children, families and staff.

More information

- See the information sheet [Your Guide To: Rotational models](#)
- [Does mixing age groups in early childhood settings support children's language development?](#)
This article discusses the impact of multi-age classrooms on vocabulary development in young children.
- [Mixed-age grouping in early childhood – creating the outdoor learning environment.](#)
This is an Australian study of mixed-age grouping in outdoor learning environments.
- [Benefits of mixed age groups.](#)
A New Zealand website, Kidsfirst Kindergartens.
- [Mixed age groups in early childhood education: What works and why.](#)
Community Early Learning Australia.



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Notes - Contact your local [Early Childhood Improvement Branch](#) to get tailored advice to suit your specific circumstances.

These are illustrative examples and not based on an actual service. The examples are intended to provide an illustration of how services could adjust their program models to accommodate increased hours. The examples may not be applicable to or suit all services.

The examples show how services can offer additional hours to children eligible for Pre-Prep, in addition to the ongoing roll-out of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten.

You may need to consider whether changes to staffing arrangements require staff consultation under the relevant industrial instrument (e.g., an enterprise agreement or award covering your service). If relevant, your peak body or industrial representative may be able to provide advice.

Star Street Kindergarten is a single-room service with 22 licensed places.

Star Street Kindergarten anticipates they will accommodate 3 children prioritised for access to Pre-Prep in 2026 and aim for an equal balance between Three- and Four-Year-Old Kindergarten groups. The service will begin offering up to 25 hours of Pre-Prep for children from priority cohorts from 2026, and between 16 and 20 hours of Pre-Prep for other 4-year-olds from 2027 under the local government area roll-out.

Star Street Kindergarten has only ever offered separate age groups, where their 3- and 4-year-olds do not overlap in the same room at any point of the week.

Service manager Xiang and her team are starting to talk about different program models, including multi-age groups and rotational models. Xiang reaches out to her local Early Childhood Improvement Branch contact, Robin, to discuss some possible timetables. Xiang would like to discuss how Star Street Kindergarten can incrementally implement changes to allow the team time to adjust and adapt.

Robin suggests the following program models for consideration, noting that the service may need to decrease the number of places offered as hours offered go up.

The examples below are intended to show one approach to how Star Street Kindergarten can gradually increase their hours of program delivery over time.

Example 1

This example allows for:

- 15 hours of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten (3YO)
- 15 hours of Four-Year-Old Kindergarten (4YO)
- 22.5 hours of Pre-Prep for 3 children from priority cohorts.

This example includes 5 groups:

- 2 x 3YO groups - Dingoes: 10 children, Echidnas: 9 children (19 children)
- 2 x 4YO groups - Wombats: 9 children, Emus: 10 children (19 children)
- Children from Pre-Prep priority cohorts (3 children).

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Dingoes (3YO) Wombats (4YO)	Dingoes (3YO) Wombats (4YO) Pre-Prep priority cohorts	Echidnas (3YO) Emus (4YO) Pre-Prep priority cohorts	Echidnas (3YO) Emus (4YO) Pre-Prep priority cohorts	Non-teaching day
19 children 8:30am-4pm (7.5 hours)	22 children 8:30am-4pm (7.5 hours)	22 children 8:30am-4pm (7.5 hours)	22 children 8:30am-4pm (7.5 hours)	

Because there are 2 sub-groups for 3YO and 4YO, there may be potential for families to choose attendance days that suit them.

At least 2 early childhood teachers are required in this example as the service delivers face-to-face kindergarten for 30 hours across the week.

There is one non-teaching a day a week for team planning.

Children from priority cohorts can attend Pre-Prep on any 3 days out of the week, which will offer 22.5 hours per week in total. This provides flexibility for families to choose days which suit them.

Having multi-age groups across all days can provide a consistent learning experience for children.

Example 2

This example allows for:

- 15 hours of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten (3YO)
- 20 hours of Pre-Prep (PP)
- 22.5 hours of Pre-Prep for 3 children from priority cohorts.

This example includes 5 groups:

- 2 x 3YO groups - Dingoes: 10 children, Echidnas: 9 children (19 children)
- 2 x Pre-Prep groups - Wombats: 9 children, Emus: 10 children (19 children)
- Children from Pre-Prep priority cohorts (3 children).

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Dingoes (3YO) Wombats (PP)	Dingoes (3YO) Wombats (PP) Pre-Prep priority cohorts	Echidnas (3YO) Emus (PP) Pre-Prep priority cohorts	Echidnas (3YO) Emus (PP) Pre-Prep priority cohorts	Wombats (PP) Emus (PP)
19 children 8:30am-4pm (7.5 hours)	22 children 8:30am-4pm (7.5 hours)	22 children 8:30am-4pm (7.5 hours)	22 children 8:30am-4pm (7.5 hours)	19 children 8:30am-1:30pm (5 hours)

In this timetable, Pre-Prep starts with 20 hours per week for 4-year-old children. Feedback from a family survey indicated that Friday is the preferred day for a shorter day for the Pre-Prep group.

Having a shorter day on Friday also accommodates team planning in the afternoon.

Children from priority cohorts can again be offered the choice of 3 days from Monday to Thursday so that they can access 22.5 Pre-Prep hours per week. Alternatively, they may also attend two 7.5-hour days and one 5-hour day with the Pre-Prep groups.

Programs are spread across 5 days a week to accommodate the same level of enrolments and provide additional hours.

Example 3

This example allows for:

- 15 hours of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten (3YO)
- 18 hours of Pre-Prep (PP)
- 24 hours of Pre-Prep for 3 children from priority cohorts.

This example includes 5 groups:

- 3 x 3YO groups - Dingoes: 4 children, Echidnas: 4 children, Kangaroos: 7 children (15 children)
- 2 x PP groups Wombats: 8 children, Emus: 7 children (15 children)
- Children from Pre-Prep priority cohorts (3 children).

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Dingoes (3YO) Kangaroos (3YO) Wombats (PP) Pre-Prep priority cohorts	Dingoes (3YO) Wombats (PP) Emus (PP) Pre-Prep priority cohorts	Echidnas (3YO) Wombats (PP) Emus (PP) Pre-Prep priority cohorts	Echidnas (3YO) Kangaroos (3YO) Emus (PP) Pre-Prep priority cohorts	Dingoes (3YO) Echidnas (3YO) Kangaroos (3YO)
22 children	22 children	22 children	21 children	15 children
9am-3pm (6 hours)	9am-3pm (6 hours)	9am-3pm (6 hours)	9am-3pm (6 hours)	9am-12pm (3 hours)

Xiang is also open to considering delivering funded kindergarten through shorter days. Shorter days may allow for more team planning opportunities across the week and may assist families seeking to align drop off and pick up with school hours.

Depending on individual preferences, children from priority cohorts can choose to attend 4 days for 24 hours or 3 days for 18 hours across Monday to Thursday.

Xiang acknowledges that shorter days may limit the number of enrolments that can be accommodated compared to delivering programs across longer days. Xiang will consider the benefits and trade-offs between the different models, and how this may impact the circumstances and preferences of the service and community, when making programming decisions.

For further information on making changes at your service, refer to the Change Management Toolkit and contact your local [Early Childhood Improvement Branch](#).