



Multi-age groups: Working with mixed age groups

Viewing children as active participants and decision makers opens up possibilities for educators to move beyond pre-conceived expectations about what children can do and learn. This requires educators to respect and work with each child's unique qualities and abilities.

The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia p9

Why it matters

Multi-age groups that bring together children aged three to five-years-old, offer unique opportunities for learning and development. Children in these settings benefit from learning from younger or older peers, and build stronger social skills that can be used as they grow older.

With the implementation of two years of funded kindergarten, programs may now include children of different ages. While this model is familiar to many educators, others will need to work with colleagues as they consider new practices that respond to the needs of all children.

Making multi-age groups work for all children requires educators to offer flexible spaces and differentiated experiences that allow them to learn at their own pace with individual support. In such environments with the active support of educators, children can be supported to access resources, materials and experiences that match their interests and skills as well as those that challenge them to extend their capabilities. Children in multi-age groups will develop friendships and engage in learning just as they would in same age settings, with the added bonus of being able to access peer support and lead learning for other children. These opportunities offer children the opportunity to develop more sophisticated social skills.



Effective implementation of two years of funded kindergarten is enhanced when educators engage with the Practice Principles of the **Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework**

- Reflective practice
- Partnerships with families
- High expectations for every child
- Respectful relationships and responsive engagement
- Equity and diversity
- Assessment for learning and development
- Integrated teaching and learning approaches
- Partnerships with professionals.

It is recommended that educators refer to the **VEYLDF** and the Practice Guides for further suggestions and ideas about continuous improvement.



Practical tips to support multi-age groups:

- **Listen carefully to families' hopes, concerns and questions.** Establish diverse and sustained mechanisms to listen to families about what they hope for their children's learning. Use this information to shape the program you offer and actively communicate with families about how you are responding to their ideas or concerns. For example, if families identify that they are worried about their three-year-old making friends, share the strategies you will use to support their child and make sure that documentation is shared that illuminates their child's progress.
- **Take some time to discuss multi-age groupings – particularly if this is new for the educator team.** Use the reflective questions to talk about multi-age groups before the program starts and throughout the year. In particular discuss the way that the educator team can demonstrate high expectations for every child as well as being responsive to children's individual needs and interests. Record your responses and suggested strategies to review as the year progresses.
- **Communicate learning strategies with families.** There may be questions about the learning that can take place when there are children of different ages in the same group. Educators can be on the 'front foot' by sharing learning strategies developed to support multi-age groups with families, as a way of helping families understand how their child will benefit from the program. Individual conversations with families about their goals for their child's learning will also provide opportunities to reassure and build confidence in the program.
- **Use your regular staff meetings to discuss the needs and interests of all children.** Plan specific and responsive strategies to support all children to actively participate. This may include spending more time with some children to assist them with daily transitions, routines or designing specific intentional teaching practice to teach social and emotional skills. These meetings will also enable educators to plan learning opportunities for children who are ready to extend their thinking.
- **Set up systems that enable children to support and lead other children's learning.** Many services working with older and younger children establish processes that support children to work positively together, for example:
 - ▶ **Set up a buddy system.** Support children by offering them opportunities to learn from older peers. This might mean that children support others during routines or particular learning experiences. Make sure that all children get an opportunity to lead others by observing and documenting children's new skills or abilities.
 - ▶ **Appoint 'experts'.** These are children who are nominated to lead others in particular areas such as puzzles or drawing or feeding the animals. Children can be given opportunities to share their skills in a more formal way and build confidence in sharing their knowledge with others.
- **Establish a culture of nurturing and care between the children.** Use intentional teaching strategies to encourage children to look out for and support each other when they experience difficulty. While some children will do this naturally, others will need to be taught how to care for others' wellbeing. This could start by establishing a place in the room where children

can go to have some time to think and be quiet, and progress to more deliberate strategies that teach children what to do when someone is hurt or in trouble.

- **Design flexible spaces that support younger and older children.** This may include specific and intentional spaces to extend learning as well as areas that allow children to practise skills over time. It is important to note that effective programs are holistic in that they offer a wide range of different learning experiences for children that provide opportunities for them to participate successfully. For example, educators might consider providing experiences such as playdough or water play that can cater for various levels of skill and provide easy ways for children to work together.

Questions for reflective discussion:

The VEYLDF Practice Principle **Reflective practice** invites educators to think about and challenge the practices they take for granted.

Use the following questions to support discussion with your colleagues.

- What are your shared understandings of the benefits of multi-age groups in early childhood education?
- How have you communicated these ideas to families?
- What does it mean to be responsive to all children? Discuss the difference between the competencies and skills of children of different ages in the group. What are the differences and similarities?
- What does it mean for children to lead others learning? What might this look like in the program and how can it be supported by educators?
- How are these commitments communicated to the families?
- What strategies have you utilised to establish strong relationship with children and their families? Why do you think they have worked? What might you do differently?

References and further reading

Department of Education and Training and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (2016). Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework. DET and VCAA, Melbourne.

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/providers/edcare/veylfdframework.pdf>

Department of Education and Training (2019). Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia. Australian Government, Canberra.

<https://docs.education.gov.au/node/2632>

Resources on the Practice Principles

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/learning/Pages/veylfdfproflearn.aspx>

Reflective Practice Education Resource

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/profdev/Pages/reflectivepractice.aspx>

NNQS Professional Learning Program e-Newsletter, no.: 11, 12, 13, 30

Search for archived issues via your web browser.

VCAA Assessment for Learning

<https://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/assessment/ey-assessment/Pages/index.aspx>

Katz, Lilian G. (1995) The Benefits of Mixed-Age Grouping. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Urbana IL.

<http://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED382411>

DET webpage supporting educators to plan for and run Three-Year-Old Kindergarten Programs

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/Pages/running-three-year-old-kinder.aspx>

