

Why a Multi-age Preschool Class?

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As we enter the 21st century, enormous changes are taking place in daily life and work. In recognizing how rapidly our world is changing, broad agreement by early childhood professionals is emerging that states when today's children become adults they will need the ability to

- communicate well, respect others and engage with them to work through differences of opinion, and function well as members of a team;
- analyze situations, make reasoned judgments, and solve new problems as they emerge;
- access information through various modes, including spoken and written language, and intelligently employ complex tools and technologies as they are developed; and
- continue to learn new approaches, skills, and knowledge as conditions and needs change.

Many of today's preschool programs are based on **developmentally appropriate practices** - programs that are based on what is known about how children develop and learn. The domains of children's development - physical, social, emotional, and cognitive - are closely related and development in one domain influences and is influenced by development in other domains. Development proceeds at varying rates from child-to-child as well as unevenly within different areas of each child's functioning.

Multi-age education involves a similar philosophy that all children can learn, but they learn at different rates. Young children need to experience real contexts in order for their personalities and temperaments to be nurtured and strengthened. Because learning tasks in a multi-age class are usually given according to the correct developmental levels, children are more likely to feel successful, and have fewer failures. Success raises self-esteem.

Although humans are not born in litters, we seem to insist that they be educated in them. The time that children spend in groups in schools and child care centers, particularly for preschoolers, amounts to replacing families and spontaneous neighborhood groups as contexts for child-to-child interaction for large portions of children's waking hours. More and more children are deprived of the information and models of competencies that were once available to them in natural mixed age groups.

The intention of mixed-age groupings in early childhood settings is to increase the diversity of the group so as to capitalize on the differences in the experience, knowledge, and abilities of the children. Young children who are encouraged, comforted and nurtured by older children will be able to emulate their older classmates when they themselves become the older ones in the group. The younger children are capable of participating and contributing to far more complex activities than they could initiate if they were by themselves. The older child in a multi-age classroom may tend to be ahead of where they would be if they had been in a single grade classroom without this exposure of cooperation and peer tutoring. Children need opportunities not only to observe and imitate a wide range of competencies, but also to find companions who match, complement, or supplement their interests in different ways.