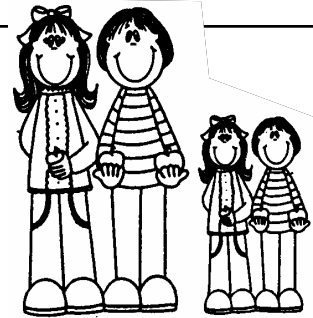


WORKING WITH “MIXED AGE” GROUPS



Most school-age child care programs enroll youth between the ages of 5 and 12; the largest number enrolled usually falls between 5 and 8 years of age. These “mixed age” groups present both a challenge and an opportunity for school-age program staff when designing educational programs to meet the needs of mixed age groups.

THE CHALLENGE

School-age child care staff are challenged by the developmental characteristics of the children with whom they work. Younger children require program activities that are different from those required by older children. “Some kids require a pillow some kids require a gym.” The kindergarten child coming in from school may be over-stimulated and require a rest period or even a nap. The older child may need to “run off” the energy accumulated during a constraining day in the classroom.

The attention span for the child of 5 is very short; it can be 15 minutes, or less. The attention span of the older child can stretch to a half-hour and, even longer.

It is difficult for a young child to follow written or verbal instructions. Providing visuals in a step-by-step process is appropriate for this age group.

The younger child learns by practicing a skill over and over again and is interested in the activity not necessarily in the product of the activity. The older child is interested in the product, the end result, the accomplishment.

There is a wide range of needs, interests and abilities among school-age children. Child development specialists emphasize that children progress sequentially through a series of stages in their development. Each stage is completed and flows into the next stage although there are occasional regressions. While the nature and characteristics of the developmental stages are predictable, a child’s progress through the stages is not.

Children of the same chronological age can vary as much as two years in their individual skills and “maturation”. Age is not necessarily a factor in predicting the characteristics a child will exhibit. A child who is five may have attained the same level of skills, or, even more advanced skills, that those attained by a child who is seven. Such a child may exhibit outstanding cognitive skills and at the same time be very slow in developing coordination and motor skills. This child may be on the way to being the “brain” in the group but could well be the last one picked for the important team game.

The realization that developmental characteristics vary across age ranges can help in designing strategies that meet the needs of the mixed-age group. This requires that staff provide a diverse set of activities, in small enough units for an appropriate time span — a definite challenge with the variations among the group.

Provide Visuals

One strategy involves providing visuals for parts of activities to meet the variations in the skill level of the potential participants. For a craft project such as origami, four or five sets of directions of varying complexity can be provided to offer several levels of skills for participants from the mixed age range.

The project should be “laid out” so that the steps of a simple, beginning project can be seen, touched and examined by the younger children. The actual look of each fold may be important to the young child attempting the project. Intermediate and advanced projects should build upon the beginning project.

Each set of directions should expand on the skills required by the previous set and contribute to the skills to be attained in the next set. This reinforcement is important in developing a variety of skills. What young child has not enjoyed watching the flight of a simple paper creation and experimented with a variety of folds? And yet, some day this child may develop this skill to the same complex level as many professional engineers who design paper airplanes and enter their creations in annual flight contests!

Develop Multiple Activities Under a Common Theme

Another strategy involves developing theme weeks or interest centers in such a way that activities are included for a mixed age grouping. A theme week involving rock or shell collections is a good example. Collections become very important to the child of nine or ten. However, younger children begin “stashing” objects that attract their attention before they reach this stage. If the group decides to collect rocks and study them, a variety of activities which employ a range of skill levels can be presented for this study.

Younger children, attracted by the pretty colors of pebbles they assemble, can classify their treasures by color, size or shape. Older children can classify by color but can also apply information regarding such characteristics as color and texture of surface to determine the kind of rock. For example, the older child can recognize and classify obsidian as a glassy textured rock, that can be black or brown.

Further study might be made on the use of a particular kind of rock. In the case of obsidian, research would reveal to older children how arrowheads of obsidian were used by Indians for hunting birds. Younger children could pursue this study by listing the ways in which they observe rocks being used.

This interest center could also review the “softness” or “hardness” of rocks. Younger children can learn that rocks are classified as soft or hard depending upon what types of materials will leave marks or

scratches on them. Older children can test and classify rocks for softness or hardness using a streak plate, simple geologic measures and color streak identification.

Other interest centers or theme weeks can be developed using this same strategy. The beginning or introductory activity will introduce the theme and provide younger children with an opportunity to use the skills they are practicing and developing. The intermediate and advanced activities will build upon and reinforce these skills. This reinforcement will be followed by an introduction of activities that give older children opportunities to practice skills appropriate to their developmental stage.

Balancing Game Activity

Games present a particular challenge to school-age program staff. The desire to vigorous activity is so powerful that the group leader needs to guard against too much of it by proper scheduling. An occasional quiet hour and the intermingling of less active games with the more vigorous ones will provide desirable balance. While most of the games of this age involve competition, competition among younger children should not be too intense. Their games should be informal, happy-go-lucky, joyous and loosely organized. Introduction of "New Games" is particularly appropriate with the mixed age group.

Use Non-Structured Materials

In meeting the challenge presented by the mixed age group, support for the strategies employed will be

supplied by the variety, quality and types of materials selected by the school-age program staff. Materials that are "non-structured" or "open-ended" are excellent because they can be used in a variety of ways with all ages of children. Such materials include:

- **Every kind of paper imaginable:** newsprint, corrugated paper, sandpaper, shelf paper, merchandise wrappings, greeting cards, construction paper, butcher paper, art tissue, wood-grained paper, wallpaper books and scraps, marbled paper, contact paper, newspaper;
- **Paints** including tempura paint, finger paints and water colors;
- **Fabric**, including ribbons, felt squares and scraps, burlap;
- **Writing materials** including markers, crayons, pens, calligraphy pens;
- **Molding materials** such as clay, papier-mâché, play dough;
- **Manipulatives** that move from the simple to complex; can include Legos, blocks, puzzles, rig-a-jigs, polydrons;
- **Dramatic play materials** including props, clothes, miniature furniture, empty food cartons, cash register, hats, work clothes, uniforms;
- **Books** with a wide range of subject matter as well as reading levels.

Use Drama and Skits

One other note on strategies: drama and skits offer outstanding opportunities to involve the total group. A mixture of skills is needed to complete a successful production. A fair share of out-front and backstage roles rely on a range of skills that can include an entire group in the "production company."

THE OPPORTUNITY

School-age programs provide an opportunity for children of different ages to see themselves clearly on the developmental ladder. They are often excited about movement to the next stage. Mixed age groups provide a setting for developing a variety of positive social behaviors.

Promote Modeling Behaviors

In his book *Creative Leadership in Recreation*, Howard Danford points out "There are certain real values to be derived from a mixture of age groups participating in a common activity which are not realizable on a segregated age basis." Younger children look up to the older students, select them as their role models, imitate them and are helped by them in the activity or on the playground. Older students respond favorably to the attention of the younger children and are stimulated in this role of mentor and begin developing leadership skills.

Increase Responsibility

School-age program staff can strengthen this process by encouraging different age groups to assume different roles and responsibilities in the program.

Older children can help by:

- working with younger members with specific activities;
- planning a single activity;
- setting-up games or equipment; .publicizing program.

Younger children can help by:

- locating and assembling materials for activities;
- helping with clean-up;
- locating, assembling and counting game pieces.

Working together, all members of the group can have a role in some daily activities. Daily snack is an excellent example. A staff member could plan the snack, purchase the ingredients, prepare the snack, set-up for it and clean-up. And, the children would make no contribution to this effort.

However, having children assume the responsibility for the daily snack with staff guidance can provide a variety of benefits. Allow the children to decide what they want for snack. Allow them to purchase the ingredients or provide staff with list of ingredients to be purchased. And, with staff guidance, have them assemble the snack, and assist with set-up and with clean-up. Their input in this process may lessen the "I don't want to eat that," complaints. It also gives them an opportunity to plan and to assume responsibility as a group for the group. And, even the youngest can express eating likes and dislikes and can make a contribution in this particular group process.

Promotes Teamwork

Other strategies present opportunities for the mixed age group to interact. Cooperative learning techniques can be employed to develop teams of mixed ages to work together on activities or projects. Games can be conducted between teams of mixed ages with rules that are appropriate to the games developed by the participants. In teams, participants can cooperate in planning weekly jobs and assume responsibility for doing the jobs planned. Working together, as mixed age teams, members of the team will be able to support the skills of each team member.

School-age staff must be sensitive to the needs and interests of each member of the group. Some older children will want to help and will enjoy being mentors for the younger children. These Children may be developing group relationships and positive social interaction skills. Other children will not enjoy this role. They may have a similar role at home and may need time to themselves. It is important that school-age staff create a caring environment in which there is opportunity for each individual to contribute to the group and the group process in the way that is appropriate for that individual.

IN SUMMARY

As school-age staff accept the challenge of working with a mixed age group, They develop strategies necessary to accommodate a wide variety of needs, interests and abilities. The strategies developed provide opportunities for individual participants to develop team work and social interaction skills. This group process can contribute to development of leadership skills and mentoring relationships. Thus the challenge of the mixed age group provides a positive opportunity for supporting the developmental needs of the children enrolled in the program.

