

One of the strengths of family day care is that children in care can be in a mixed age group, possibly ranging from babies and toddlers to older primary schoolage children. This means that not only can siblings be in care together, but also that children have the opportunity to form relationships and learn from other children of varying ages.

For the carer, having a wide range of age groups can be positive and challenging. To make the most of opportunities that come with a mixed age group, carers need to aim to meet each child's individual needs and interests while considering the group as a whole. Individual differences and varying developmental levels in children must be taken into account as they can affect group dynamics.

## The Big Picture

Different carers will have different ideas about what a good age mix of children is. Much depends on the individual children in the group, so it is important that carers focus on each child as unique, with needs, interests and rights, as well as a valued member of the group.

The atmosphere, including relationships and interpersonal interactions, is more significant to the success of mixed age groups than to the actual number of ages of children in the family day carer's home.

## Relationships

Prioritising relationships is important. Helping all children to respect, enjoy and have fun with each other should be the main aim, regardless of individual ages or abilities.

Avoid emphasising age differences, instead talk about similar interests and experiences between older and younger children. For example, they may have a similar family background, or love painting and drawing. Focus on what they have in common while at the same time acknowledge differences.

Help children respect individual differences just as you do as a carer. For example, some children are more outgoing than others, some prefer to spend time by themselves, while others are shy. Everyone wants to be accepted as an individual and be a valued member of the group. It is important to focus on and acknowledge each child's strengths and talents.

Build into the daily routine times when children can be by themselves or with one other child. Avoid operating with an 'all-in-together' approach. Older children especially will want time to just be with another child of the same age. Do not force

children to spend time together. At the same time, it is important that no child feels excluded or left out. Develop some reasonable rules and strategies to support children to negotiate how they spend time together. Children should be actively involved in these discussions.

It is important to resist the temptation to ask older children to be responsible for younger ones. It may be particularly tempting to ask this of your own children. Burdening older children with the responsibility of younger ones can prevent warm, positive relationships from developing between children, and is not fair and can be unsafe. Of course some older children may enjoy taking some responsibility for younger children and in some cultural groups this is common and comfortable. However, creating an expectation that everyone helps and cares for each other and looks out for each other's safety and wellbeing is important. Whenever a child helps another or shows kindness and caring, regardless of age difference, this should be acknowledged.

Creating a sense of group or community, can be done in many ways. Celebrating a birthday or another special personal or cultural event, sending a card if someone is sick, or alerting other children to something important that may be happening in another child's life can help children to learn to care for each other. It is essential to ensure that this is appropriate for the individual child and maintains confidentiality.

The most important relationship is the child's relationship with you. This is the foundation for them being able to relate positively with others. Be sure that you give some one-on-one time to older children who need it just as much as the younger ones but may not ask for it. Try to organise the day so that you can be available to talk when they arrive from school.

## Experiences and materials

Having children of a variety of ages in care can create opportunities for older ones to teach the younger ones. The chance to share what they can do and what they know with younger children can increase older children's confidence. Younger children are often very admiring and complimentary and can learn so much just by being around older children.

Consider projects where everyone can contribute. For example, group cooking, group creative experiences or gardening activities.

One key to success with a mixed age group is to offer a range of choices of things to do that will cater for the needs and interests of individual children. It is also beneficial to provide an environment rich with materials and the time and space to use them. There should be few times when everyone is expected to do the same thing.

Open-ended materials, that is, materials that can be used flexibly and in a variety of ways are best value in a mixed age group as they can cater for different abilities and interests. Making a variety of art and craft materials available, music that invites participation and movement, books, blocks, balls, and dramatic play are just a few examples that can be offered with something for everyone.

One challenge is that sometimes what older children are interested in, for example, some music, TV shows, sports, or construction projects, may not be appropriate for younger children. Time and space should be created where older children can enjoy these activities separate from younger children.

Provide some special experiences and materials just for the older children. Opportunities to cook, plan and organise an excursion for the entire group, take responsibility for a garden, or put on a play or concert for the younger children are examples of experiences that are likely to be taken up enthusiastically.

Avoid too many whole group activities. A few may work well, but the key is to individualise experiences.

If an activity or materials are good for a baby then chances are they will be boring for older children.

Take advantage of times when you can focus directly on an age group. For example, when babies and toddlers are sleeping or when older children are at school.

## Privileges, responsibilities, rules and limits

In a mixed age group it can be difficult to acknowledge the greater maturity of older children, their ability to be more independent and to exercise judgement while being seen to be fair by all children.

Older children may believe that the younger ones 'get away with everything', and the younger ones may believe 'it's not fair – they get to do so much more than we do'.

A 'one size fits all' approach does not work with a mixed age group. It is important that older children are expected to take more responsibility for themselves than younger children are. They should be expected to be more mature and therefore can be given greater autonomy and freedom.

It helps if you are 'transparent' and talk with children about the rules and limits you set and the reasons for them. That is important because you need to be sure that you can justify them to yourself and the children. Share dilemmas with the children, the challenge of being fair and being sensible. Make it clear that in the end you will have to make some decisions, although you will listen to their views and take them into account.

Accept that conflicts will occur and use these opportunities to help children learn to deal with conflicts positively and constructively. Encourage children to use words to resolve conflicts and give children the chance to work these out themselves if possible. If the children involved in the conflict are not fairly matched, or if negotiations are getting out of hand, then it is important that you step in and help. Help children learn that privileges go along with obligations and responsibilities.

## Further Information

- Amorson, A. (2001). 'Fostering Friendships'. *Jigsaw (22)*. National Family Day Care Council of Australia: Gosford.
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