

Multi-Age Classroom

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What is a multi-age classroom?

Typically, one with an age span of two years or more. Children enter the classroom at the younger age and spend the year there. Then the next year, they return to the same teacher and the same classroom as “the big kids” while a new group of younger children enter.

The teacher shapes the curriculum so that it meets the needs of all children. Some activities are done with the whole group. Sometimes children are divided into small groups based either on age, or on the skills they have in the subject area (e.g. readers and non-readers for a literacy lesson).

In addition to teacher-led learning, there is plenty of peer-to-peer teaching and learning. Sometimes the teacher assigns students a ‘buddy’ for a project, and encourages the more skilled child to teach and help the other one. There’s also informal mentoring, where children show each other how to do things. And lots of unintentional modelling, where the older (or more skilled) child is simply doing something they’re good at, not even aware that the younger child is observing, absorbing, and mimicking.

Benefits

- Younger children learn from the older children.
 - They are exposed to new ways of thinking. The older children are further along in their brain development, so have better language skills, better problem-solving abilities, and are capable of more abstract thinking. The younger ones gain perspective from this.
 - They learn more advanced physical skills. As they watch the big kids challenge themselves physically, they are also likely to push themselves to keep up.
 - They learn life skills faster. Whether it’s potty training or study skills, they are motivated to be able to do things for themselves, just like the older kids do.
- Older children learn too!
 - They learn teaching skills and leadership skills. They learn how to set appropriate limits.
 - They learn empathy, compassion, and responsibility.
 - With academic skills, as they teach them to younger kids or listen in on lessons with younger kids, it gives them the opportunity to review ideas, re-examine them from their older perspective, and practice skills to cement what they’ve learned.
- Individualized curriculum: A quality multi-age program is child centered, tailored to kids’ unique skills, not just their age. Projects are targeted to the needs and interests of each child.
- Children stay with the same teacher for multiple years.

- The teacher gets to know the child's strengths and weaknesses, and is better able to focus on that child's unique needs.
- There is a stronger parent-teacher relationship.
- For the child, there's the benefit of consistency, and a sense of safety and security in the classroom which enables better learning.
- Year-to-year transition: youngers have less anxiety about moving up, because they can see what comes next. Olders gain confidence as they can see how far they've come.
- Less competition / labelling.
 - In a single age classroom, it's easy to compare kids and say some are gifted, some delayed. In a mixed age classroom, it may be clearer that there's a range of development: the one who does best in math class may have the hardest time in music class, regardless of age.
- A more cooperative, caring learning environment.
 - Students are less likely to misbehave in multiage groups than in single-age classrooms. If older children misbehave, the teacher asks them to remind the younger one what the rules are, and everyone's self-regulatory behavior improves.
- Research consistently shows that on standardized testing, children from multi-age classrooms perform as well or better than their peers in single-grade classrooms.

Signs of a quality multi-aged program:

Intentionally multi-aged. You want a program that embraces this format for all their classes because they wholeheartedly believe in the benefits of multi-aged classes. It's not as good if the only reasons for multi-age classrooms are budgetary reasons, limited student population or limited classroom space.

Skilled teachers, experienced with multi-age classrooms. You want a program where the teacher *loves* to teach multi-age classes, and is committed to meeting the needs of all the kids. Teachers need to have appropriate expectations for the youngers, not asking more than they are capable of. They also need appropriate expectations of the olders, giving them challenges that help to build their skills.

Individualized curriculum: You're hoping to hear that each child's learning is individualized... one child might be in both the 'advanced math' group and the 'still working on reading skills' group. Teachers need to do frequent and holistic assessments of learning to make sure *all* the students are well-served.

Diverse kids. At some schools, they place low-performing older students with high-performing older students. For the lower-performing kids, this tends to cause self-esteem issues, and tends to lead to labelling of them as 'dumb kids.' For the higher-performing kids, they might find themselves very frustrated at the slower learning pace of the other kids, and not feel like they have the opportunity to move at the pace they're ready for. It's better when all classrooms have a diversity of kids, with skills in a wide range of areas. Then it's more likely that all children will be valued, for the unique skills that they bring to the community.