

## Early Childhood Indicators of Progress

# Using the ECIPs with Children in Mixed Age Groupings



## Introduction

Many children are cared for in settings with mixed age groupings. They may spend their days in a family child care home with a group of children that includes infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. School-agers may join them for the hours after the end of the school day. Some young children may be cared for in a child care or school-based program with multiple ages in the same classroom. For example, a preschool may group three- to five-year-olds with one teacher or provider.

Early childhood professionals recognize that there are benefits to mixed age grouping as well as challenges. In this brief we will look at both and will explore how the new design of the Minnesota Early Childhood Indicators of Progress (ECIPs): Minnesota's Early Learning Standards provides a meaningful and easy-to-use format for teachers and providers in such settings so that they can look across the continuum of development in each domain.

## Benefits of Mixed Age Grouping

Unless they are multiples (twins, triplets, etc.), many children in families are raised in a mixed-age experience. They have older or younger siblings with whom they play, and go through their daily lives. As Lillian Katz points out, young children are generally not born in litters as are puppies or kittens. "The intention of mixed-age grouping in early childhood settings is to increase the heterogeneity of the group so as to capitalize on the differences in the experience, knowledge, and abilities of the children." (Katz 1995, 2)

There are multiple benefits of mixed age grouping identified in the early childhood literature including:

- Family-style environment
- A positive social environment
- Continuity of care
- Opportunities for cross-age learning

**“Age mixing allows younger children to engage in and learn from activities that they could not do alone or with just playmates of the same age (age-mates); observe and emulate models of activities more advanced than their own; and receive emotional support and care beyond that which age-mates could provide.” (Gray 2011, 503-504)**

Let us look at each of these benefits in more depth.

When children are being cared for in an environment similar to that of their family homes, their sense of trust and comfort is enhanced. In fact, in a family child care setting, the environment is often the care provider's personal home. As pointed out in Minnesota's Knowledge and Competency Framework for Early Childhood Professionals: Working with Family Child Care, additional benefits can be found:

- Care and education of young children in a homelike environment
- A setting in which children from a single family can stay together
- Smaller group sizes with mixed ages
- Continuity of care from infancy to school age (MDH, MDE and DHS, 5)

Teachers and providers working with mixed ages of children can create a social environment with a positive, empathetic emphasis as older children interact with younger ones. Katz talks about the opportunities for nurturing that can be developed in such settings.

“... the 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 a group. Children need opportunities not only to observe and imitate a wide range of competencies, but also to find companions among their peers who match, complement, or supplement their interests in different ways.” (Katz 1995, 2)

In mixed age settings, children can stay with one teacher or provider across years so that there is continuity of care. Especially important for infants and toddlers, continuity with a familiar teacher or provider helps children of all ages develop confidence.

“Having one caregiver over an extended period of time rather than switching every six to nine months or so is important to the expansion of a child's development. Switching from one caregiver to another takes its toll. The child has to build trust all over again. When a very young child loses a caregiver, he really loses part of his sense of himself and the way the world operates: The things that the child knows how to do, and the ways that he knows to be simply don't work any

more.” (Lally, Torres, and Phelps 2010)

Finally, in mixed age groupings there are opportunities for cross-age learning in all domains which can benefit both younger and older children.

## Using the ECIPs in Mixed Age Groupings

The ECIPs were intentionally formatted across a continuum for the 2016 revision. In each domain, indicators are listed across age groups so that teachers and providers can easily identify where a child is presently performing and what comes next in the learning trajectory. The expectation is that teachers and providers are thoughtfully observing children as they care for and interact with them. For some of those observations, they will need to record what they have seen and heard so that they can refer to such documentation and relate it back to the ECIPs. This documentation will then assist them as they make plans for future experiences for the children.

The continuum design allows teachers and caregivers to see each child as an individual with unique capabilities. The components and subcomponents of the ECIPs provide a unifying aspect to pull together the multiple levels of indicators seen for the different ages of the children. For instance, teachers and providers can use the indicators in a single domain, for instance Scientific Thinking, to plan activities that build skills for every child in the group.

It is important to remember that infants are laying the essential foundations for multiple areas of learning whenever they play and interact. There are fewer indicators in the ECIPs for infants than in the older ages. This doesn't mean that the indicators for infants are less important; if anything, they are more important because of their much more global foundational role in the child's developing potential.

For all teachers and providers of young children, observation, documentation, and planning related to the ECIPs are part of best practices. Minnesota's Knowledge and Competency Framework for Early Childhood Professionals: Working with Family Child Care also support such practices. Family child care providers must understand:

...how to plan and implement appropriate curriculum and instructional practices based on developmental knowledge of individual young children, the community, and the curriculum goals and content including how to use:

- developmentally appropriate methods that include play, small group projects, open-ended questioning, group discussion, problem solving, cooperative learning and inquiry experiences to help children develop curiosity, solve problems, and make decisions.

- knowledge of the sequence of development to create and implement meaningful, integrated learning experiences using children's ideas, needs, interests, culture and home experiences. (MDH, MDE and DHS, 17-18)

## Challenges to Be Addressed in Mixed Age Groupings

There are challenges for teachers and providers working with mixed age groupings. They have to become familiar with the expectations across the developmental spectrum depending on the ages with whom they work. This can be especially true for family child care providers and is recognized in the competencies.

“Because FCC providers care for and educate children from birth through early school age, they need to be well grounded in knowledge of child development for this broad range of ages.” (MDH, MDE and DHS, 5-6)

However, no matter in what setting they work with mixed age groups of children, all teachers and providers need to address children's individual needs and differences. Child development varies widely across the early years. Children do not develop skills and capabilities at exactly the same times. Teachers and providers will have to pay close attention to the strengths of each child and relate those to the appropriate indicators just as they will have to recognize where the child is more challenged. The continuum format of the revised ECIPs is meant to

assist teachers and providers in the important process of individualizing their curricular approaches.

One important teaching strategy that can help with the planning process for mixed-age groups is to provide experiences that are more open-ended in nature.

Open-endedness encourages teachers to choose materials and play opportunities so that children have many possibilities. Children with a variety of skills and differing understandings can be successful in a variety of ways as they engage in open-ended play experiences. (Rendon and Gronlund 2017)

When experiences are planned to address only one specific goal as a target, children may succeed or fail. It is more important to emphasize challenging yet achievable goals for children so that they are not faced with either the frustration of repeated failure or the ease of continuing success. Open-ended experiences can address multiple goals that can be challenging yet achievable for a range of children and are thus most appropriate in mixed age settings. Teachers and providers, then, must be ready to provide the support or assistance children need in order to succeed. “Provision of such support, often called scaffolding, is a key feature of effective teaching.” (Copple and Bredekamp 2009, 15) Peers who are more competent can also scaffold learning for each other. Thus, open-ended experiences can be particularly beneficial in mixed age settings.

## Conclusion

Benefits and challenges come with grouping children of mixed ages. Family child care homes are an important choices that families have as they consider placement for the care of their children. Other early childhood settings that choose to organize around mixed ages also offer an important possibility for families. Emphasizing the benefits to mixed age grouping and using the ECIPs to observe, document, and plan for individual children will help overcome the challenges that may arise.

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