

# Teaching mixed-age classes

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## What's the idea?

In small schools across the country, many children are taught in mixed-age classes. It is not uncommon to find four year groups being taught in one class, and sometimes the mixture of ages is even greater. While there is some evidence that this type of grouping benefits children's pro-social behaviours (Lindström and Lindahl, 2011) this type of class can be challenging to plan for and organise.

During the current climate, many schools caring for the children of key workers are supporting mixed-age classes for the first time and although academic progress is not a main focus, classes such as this can provide a new challenge for teachers.

## What does the research say?

While there is much research around mixed-attainment grouping, there is a lack of evidence around approaches to teaching in mixed-age classes, particularly in the UK. However, Smit and Engelo (2015) have provided a number of practical suggestions and considerations about how to structure the curriculum in permanent mixed-age settings, which may help teachers support this kind of class. These include:

**Differentiating instruction:** Learners in each grade group engage in learning tasks appropriate to their level of learning

**Socially collaborative classroom:** Supportive classroom climate, where students help each other and collaborate flexibly

**Flexible grouping:** Learning is flexibly organised in the whole class, and includes

teacher-led groups, individuals within groups, collaborative groups and individuals

**General topic learning:** The same general topic/theme in the same subject is covered for all learners, but at different levels

**The quality of the learning tasks:** The learning tasks are more open-ended, exploratory and problem-oriented.

## How does this work in practice?

Mixed-age classes can provide a nurturing base for children of all ages during these uncertain times. While not always focusing on academic content and the acquisition of new knowledge, it may be a good idea to think about planning activities which will engage children of a variety of ages. For example, although all children may enjoy painting, older children will be able to paint with more skill and for longer periods than their younger classmates who may still be developing their fine motor skills and ability to maintain concentration. As a result of this, groupings may have to be flexible, as some children move through a number of activities during which their older classmates remain focused on one.

In a socially collaborative classroom, older or more confident children are encouraged to take on the role of mentors and coaches, providing scaffolding and support to their classmates with the benefit of developing their own social competencies and enabling younger pupils to access more challenging activities. Finegan (2001) suggests that project work such as that seen in Italian Reggio Emilia schools may be beneficial in mixed-age settings, because this type of activity allows

children to explore a topic at their own pace and level in an exploratory and open-ended way.

Although the current school situation may not be focused on children making academic progress, and there will be no measurement of this, it remains important that children are engaged and motivated during their time in school as well as feeling supported. Although it presents challenges for the teachers, mixed-age classes could support rather than hinder this.

## Top tips

- » **Plan a variety of activities which may run concurrently and cater for children who are developing the ability to concentrate for increasing periods of time.**
- » **Provide activities, games or toys which children have access to at any time to ensure everyone can remain involved.**
- » **Encourage older and more confident pupils to act as mentors to support their younger classmates.**
- » **Keep groupings flexible; they may change from activity to activity over the course of the day.**
- » **Consider the use of a general theme allowing a whole class introduction but then plan age-appropriate activities within it.**
- » **Use open-ended and exploratory topics so that children can learn and explore at their own pace.**
- » **Remember that if your children leave school happy, you have done a great job.**

## WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- Finegan F (2001) Alternative early childhood education: Reggio Emilia. *Kappa Delta Pi Record* 74: 82–84.
- Lindström E and Lindahl E (2011) The effect of mixed-age classes in Sweden. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research* 55(2): 121–144.
- Smit R and Engeli E (2015) An empirical model of mixed-age teaching. *International Journal of Educational Research* 74: 136–145.