

Observations of Children Under Three in the Kindergarten

• Lisa Gromicko

The benefits of mixed-aged kindergartens are many, especially today with smaller families and frequently unsettled family dynamics. One important benefit spoken of is that young children will have fewer caregivers in the early years, if they have been included at earlier ages in the kindergarten. As younger and younger children come into the kindergartens in our schools today, many questions have arisen. This year, I had the valuable opportunity to experience and learn from the addition (due to school necessity) of several youngest children to my kindergarten class.

The primary questions that I carry now are: What is the long-term health impact for children under three years old, of the “kindergarten” experience? Shouldn’t children from birth to age three, have an age-appropriate experience instead, because of their critical life stage? What does “kindergarten readiness” really mean, in this age of inclusion? I feel that we need to earnestly revisit this question, in particular.

Two successful early childhood models of mixed ages (including children under three) come to mind. They are Nøkken, a care center in Copenhagen, and the LifeWays care centers in North America. What they share is the inclusion of youngest children, but more importantly, the *separation* of the youngest children from the “kindergarten age” children during large parts of the day/morning. I believe that this is essential if we are going to include youngest children into our “kindergarten” programs. This adds to

the school expense of our programs, which must provide a sufficient number of adults to attend to the youngest children, while allowing the needs of the kindergarten-aged children to also be met. This year, I ended up needing two assistants, and this was without being able to separate the younger children from the group.

The following are some general, practical observations that I made of the class this year, from a traditional “class”-size-group perspective. The additions to our existing kindergarten age group this year were ten two-and-a-half-year-olds and several young three-year-olds.

Two-and-a-half-year-olds need:

- Humor, tenderness, predictability, SIMPLICITY, repetition
- *Much* more lead time before transitions than kindergarten-aged children
- *Small* group size
- Not having to hold hands with other children
- Food cut-up/cooled off
- LOTS and LOTS of food!
- Plenty of time in the morning rhythm for several bathroom/diapering changes
- A lot of interaction with adults: hugs, rocking, modeling play, modeling social exchanges, modeling kindness, conflict mediation, help to build “houses”
- Physical care: washing hands, potty training, putting on and taking off shoes/clothes, nose

drips, diapering, washing face, using napkin, using spoon

- Not being expected to participate in “kindergarten” activities
- Adult attention to building volatility between youngest children and frequent pre-emptive measures by adults to avoid injury—often providing monitored space & time for toddler children to attempt to work it out—not jumping in too soon (while also trying to avoid a brawl)
- Adult tolerance for the words “mine!” and “no!”
- Adult objectivity, humor
- Predictable rest-times (pillow, blanket – some children this age still need a morning nap)
- Space to play without interference from older children,
- Tagging along with adults all morning,
- Encouragement, opportunities for autonomy
- Not being asked to go very long without a potty break (they often don’t ask for one and won’t want to stop for one, either)
- Floor-time in circle, with simple gestures and plenty of repetition
- Quiet times
- Simple puppetry for story/ with repetition of verse and telling the story long enough
- More adult involvement than with kindergarten children in establishing simple ‘rules’ such as staying in our chair at the table, keeping our clothes on, not pushing/hitting/biting, “gentle hands”
- Adult awareness of the **choking danger** of many play and household items
- Adult-only accessible locks on the doors or gates leading outside
- Some “formed” toys like a tea set, little cars, dolls, blocks, spoons, places to climb into, stools
- A few “extra special” adult tools for distraction such as a little finger puppet that comes out of adult’s apron pocket, a picture book
- The ability for an adult to take a tantruming toddler for a “walk” through school or outside to see the bunny or other distraction
- Child-proof/odor proof diaper pail - recommended: “Diaper Genie” (you don’t have to buy their refills, just use medium-sized garbage bags, changed daily)
- Potty chairs

Special challenges with younger children:

- Communication challenges with speaking. Many are still in “naming” phase of speech.

- Easily over-stimulated by each other and by the daily activities of the whole group.
- Frequent volatility and aggressiveness with each other and toward older children, “defensiveness” patterns.
- Parallel play, not cooperative yet.
- More challenging behaviors around February and March, with many turning three.
- Emergence of “I”—need for autonomy within boundaries, protection of the senses.

Kindergarten age children (with very young children included) need:

- Humor, tenderness, empathy, understanding around frustration about the “little” children
- Security of knowing that adults are aware of what the younger children are doing
- Help from adults to see that younger children are “learning” and how they can help them, too
- Protection of their (older children’s) play space
- Guidance in how to integrate younger children into play (e.g. Puppet shows with youngest children as willing audience members—very successful)
- Enough puppetry and large building materials
- Maintenance of “form,” predictability
- Inclusions in circle that are for “them”
- Privileges, e.g. Washing dishes, directing “clean-up,” using certain “teacher” items
- Adult modeling and support of working with conflict with youngest children
- Adults modeling patience, tolerance and compassion for younger children in their tantrums
- Maintaining some “sacredness”
- Encouragement and acknowledgement of their “big brother/big sister” efforts in helping the youngest
- Being allowed to be “little” themselves
- Taking a loudly crying younger child out of the room during “quiet” times (e.g. Story, birthday celebrations, circle, rest)
- Participation in care of the environment
- Space away from younger children
- Adults also being available for *them*.

Special challenges with the older children (with youngest children present):

- Regression of level of play from the preceding year, lasting into the winter. Less building, in particular.
- Concerns of parents regarding possible

simplification of class activities, aggressiveness of youngest children.

- Less ability for adults to spend on more complex or extended projects with kindergarten children.
- Teacher needs: Flexibility; willingness to simplify and adapt; slowing down.

Many beautiful interactions happen daily between the oldest and youngest children. I have sensed that the presence of these youngest children brought a golden “grace” to the kindergarten-aged children; much sweeter and more innocent play developed, with very little cynicism. But, the ongoing, observable stresses for the youngest children and challenges for the oldest children in a combined class can be significant and require great consideration, as we weigh the benefits and costs of including children under three in the kindergarten.

Consider the words of Dr. Elisabeth Jacobi in “Kindergarten Readiness” (*The Developing Child: The*

First Seven Years, WECAN, p. 109):

A three-year-old or a younger child has almost a protective covering over himself which preserves him in his world. If one brings such a child into the kindergarten, then this covering rips open in about three weeks and a “plucked, featherless little bird” stands before us. This can happen even if the child visits the kindergarten on an hourly basis, and the torn covering cannot be repaired simply by removing the child from the kindergarten. This unveiling of the protective covering occurs naturally between three-and-a-half- to four years old. Only then is the child really ready for the kindergarten.

Lisa Gromicko lives in Boulder, Colorado and has spent fourteen years in Waldorf early childhood settings. She can be reached at: lisagromicko@mac.com.