



THINKING ABOUT MIXED-AGE CARE: MAXIMIZING YOUR FAMILY CHILD CARE SPACE

**NC CCR&R
Family Child Care Project**

**NC CCR&R
School Age Initiative**

MIXED-AGE CARE AND YOUR FAMILY CHILD CARE SPACE

A fundamental feature of family child care is the ability to serve mixed-age groups of children in a single learning space. While other early education programs in North Carolina have specific limitations around combining age groups, family child care programs thrive in their ability to help children from birth to twelve-years-old grow and develop together.

The educational and cognitive benefits of mixed-age groups in family child care are substantial. Mixed-age care:

- allows younger children to scaffold play and language development by observing older peers.
- provides older children with opportunities to learn social-emotional skills like patience, compassion, and teamwork.
- provides children with a stable teacher that understands their learning style, personality, and educational preferences.

Effective mixed-age care depends on how you develop your family child care space. To maximize the educational and cognitive benefits provided by mixed-age care, your family child care space must accommodate the learning, development, and care of **ALL** your students.

Take a moment and reflect on the children you serve:

- Does your space meet the educational and development needs of all your students?
- Do infants and toddlers have a space to explore their senses and develop their gross motor mechanics?
- Do your preschool children have the areas and materials they need to cooperatively play and socialize?
- Do your school age students have the space and resources they require to stay engaged and feel welcomed?

No matter your early education experience, you need to constantly evaluate how you approach room arrangement. Small changes in the environment can create big improvements for the success of every age child in your family child care program.

ROOM ARRANGEMENT IN MIXED-AGE CARE

Effective mixed-age care depends on group appropriate room arrangement. The layout of your home learning space must reflect the development level, accessibility, and health and safety requirements for each age group in your care.

Some age groups require routine care furniture and play equipment that might take up a larger amount of program space. For example, if your family child care program serves infants, then space is needed for diaper changing furniture, refrigeration, and cribs. Be intentional about how you arrange the routine care furniture throughout your learning environment. Make sure that preschool and school age children who want to build with blocks, listen to music, and do homework still have space to learn, play, and relax. The goal of mixed-age care is to provide an environment where required care routines are conducted alongside the play and learning needs of all children enrolled.

The health and safety of each child is the primary responsibility of an early education professional. While many health and safety requirements mandated by the Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE) extend across age groups, there are specific regulations for children based on age and care environment. Make sure to consider all health and safety precautions for each age group in your care as you arrange your learning space and stay in contact with your DCDEE Licensing Consultant and local Child Care Resource and Referral (CCR&R) agency for support.

Below are some great room arrangement tips for your mixed-age family child care program:



INFANTS AND TODDLERS

- As you develop your family child care learning areas, reflect on the space required for infants and toddler rest spaces. The DCDEE requires at least three feet of space between cots and cribs (Chapter 9 .1724). Be strategic in how you implement your sleeping arrangements to accommodate areas where older children might play and socialize during infant and toddler rest times.
- Shelving and material storage areas are a necessity for mixed-age family home programs. If you care for infants and toddlers, think about where you arrange larger pieces of furniture. Larger shelving can easily block your line-of-sight and create safety issues when supervising smaller children. Storage lockers that are safe for school age students might create entrapment areas for infants and younger toddlers learning to crawl.
- Infants and toddlers need a space of their own. A fundamental part of early brain development is individual interaction with a trusted caregiver. Devote a section of your family child care environment to floor play and interaction. Set up smaller shelving with age-appropriate materials for younger child accessibility. Place pillows and mats on the floor for adult sitting and child protection.
- Exploration begins at birth. Infants and toddlers develop cognitively and socially when they have a chance to learn in different environments. Set up materials in different areas around your program's learning space to encourage greater learning and social development opportunities.
- Infants and toddlers require more routine care items than older children. Arrange your learning space to allow enough storage areas for diapers, wipes, medication, and bottle preparation. Separating storage areas by age will help you with organization and classroom management.



PRESCHOOL

- It is important to include rugs, mats, and other forms of softness for preschool students in your mixed-age family child care program. Activity areas like blocks, dramatic play, and reading occur on or near the ground. Ground softness in these areas ensures that children stay comfortable and engage in play.
 - Be aware of where you place quiet and loud areas in your learning space. Many preschool activity areas create noise. If your family child care program serves infants or toddlers, these louder areas can disrupt routines and develop challenging behaviors. Place resting spaces near quieter activity spaces with less distractions.
 - Indoor gross motor play helps preschool children process learning skills and decompress. Create a reasonable space for indoor gross motor activities like dancing, exercising, and yoga. If your program does not have space for a designated indoor gross motor area, craft a plan to ensure that indoor movement can take place in case of bad weather.
- Many preschool activities require tables. The problem with tables is that they take up space. Be intentional about where you place tables in relation to other pieces of routine care furniture in your mixed-age care program. Properly arranged tables can serve multiple roles for learning, eating, and independent play. Be aware that too many tables increase the chance for infants and toddlers to bump their heads as they learn to walk.

SCHOOL AGE

- Typical school age care hours occur for shorter periods of the program day. Keeping school age materials available all day might not be safe or necessary based upon these shorter hours. Create material carts for school age students that have ample amounts of age-appropriate learning and play items. These carts can be rolled out into your learning areas when school age students arrive, and later stored when not in use. School age material carts are also fantastic for summer care and during days when traditional school is canceled.
- School age students spend a majority of the day sitting in hard and uncomfortable environments. Soft seating options like a couch or love seat give older children an inviting space to learn and play. Large pillows or mats are excellent for older children if you do not feel comfortable with larger pieces of furniture in your learning space.
- School age children are larger than infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Pathways and play areas that might work for younger children can make school age students feel closed in. Make an effort to increase the size of spaces where school age students learn and play with other children in your program.
- While many school age students only spend a few hours of the day in your care, incorporate their presence into your family child care space. Hang their artwork on the wall. Post pictures of them and their family. Give them a space to safely place their belongings during care. Making these older children feel welcomed and a part of your program family is vital to their social and emotional development.
- Be aware of the extra storage space needed for school age related materials. Since school age students use materials that are not age appropriate for younger children, they should be stored for a larger portion of the day. Having a safe space to place these materials is vital for the health and safety of all children in your program.

MATERIALS IN MIXED-AGE CARE

Proper material selection goes hand-in-hand with developing a high-quality mixed-age learning environment. While traditional child care and school age facilities have the option to spread age groups into several classrooms, many family child care programs are limited to one or two learning spaces. Combining multiple age groups into a single classroom requires careful considerations for materials and play equipment. Be aware of what materials you provide to children and keep supervision in the forefront of all material options.

As you determine the materials you provide in your mixed-age learning space, remember to rotate learning items on a regular basis. Children of all ages become bored when they have to play with the same materials every day. **Boredom often results in challenging behaviors and teacher stress.** Providing each age group with an intentionally selected assortment of materials, and rotating these materials on a regular basis, will ensure that students remain engaged.

Here are some tips to help you maximize the impact of materials in your mixed-age family child care space.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS

- Place infant and toddler materials in accessible bins and totes. This can help you move materials throughout the learning space and assist with sanitation.
- Be sure to include enough infant and toddler materials in each activity area. Materials for younger children are often overlooked in favor of preschool geared materials.
- Be aware of the health and safety hazards surrounding preschool and school age materials.
- Condition is key. Older students can break and crush infant and toddler materials. Rotating abused materials out of play will maximize the learning opportunities for your younger children.

PRESCHOOL

- Provide a wide selection of activity areas for preschool students. Remember that tables are useful for play and learning.
- Dramatic play is more than housekeeping and dress-up. Include materials for playscape creations, fairy gardens, and other forms of imaginative play.
- Keep fine motor materials sorted and ready for use. Bins with lids are a great option to keep smaller materials away from younger students. Label all material bins with words AND pictures to help preschool students with language/sight recognition.
- Materials do not have to stay in one space all day. Great preschool learning occurs when children are able to use materials throughout the learning space.

SCHOOL AGE

- Make sure to label school age books and games by level of difficulty. School age care spans a wide age range. Some materials that are great for older school age students are not appropriate for younger school age students. Labeling materials by age with colored stickers is an easy way to showcase age ranges.
- School age students love music. Having a way for older students to listen to appropriate music can help these students relax and move. Think about purchasing newer music devices like MP3 players and wireless speakers.
- School age students can use more difficult art mediums. Art options like clay working, beading, and weaving are great for older students.

OUTDOOR LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR MIXED-AGE CARE

Your mixed-age family child care learning space extends past the indoor classroom. Outdoor spaces provide children of all ages opportunities to learn, move, and socialize in ways that cannot be achieved inside. As you care for multiple age ranges, you must arrange your outdoor learning space in ways that maximize the safety and learning goals of each child you serve. Be intentional and reflective.

As you look over the tips below, take time to look back on the family child care Rules and Regulations found in section .1700 of the Chapter 9 DCDEE Rules and Regulations Handbook.

INFANTS AND TODDLERS



- Infants and toddlers rely on their senses to understand the world around them. Planting a safe sensory garden in your play space provides younger children with new materials to experience and learn.
- Shade is important – especially for infants. Invest in multiple shade structures to keep infants and toddlers out of harsh sunlight. Shade trees also greatly reduce direct sun exposure with a more natural feel.
- Reflect on the different play surfaces available to younger children. Sand and grass are easy outdoor play surfaces that provide softness and sensory development.

PRESCHOOL

- Climbing structures need acceptable fall zones. Make sure that any climbing object over 18 inches has the approved amount of fall zone material surrounding the entire structure. Contact your local CCR&R agency to access the Playground Safety training course.
- Remember the importance of portable outdoor materials. Balls, hoops, chalk, and frisbees are great portable materials that stimulate preschool play. Make sure that these materials are in good repair.
- Bringing indoor materials like art supplies, books, and blocks outside can enhance learning and create a change of pace for children. The best learning experiences with materials can take place outside.



SCHOOL AGE

- School age children need space to make learning choices in your outdoor space. Give older children the ability to participate in group games, individual play, or independent quiet activities. Some school age children need to run and exercise after traditional school hours. Others want to rest, talk, or finish homework.
- You don't need large climbing structures to meet the gross motor needs of school age students. However, it is wise to invest in some older themed outdoor materials to encourage school age participation. Basketball goals and small, portable soccer nets are two pieces of play equipment that appeal to school age children without breaking the bank.
- Giving older students the ability to contribute to the beauty of your outdoor learning space creates community and involvement. If your play space allows, have older students construct useable garden beds where they can plant vegetables and herbs. Older students can create the beds and guide younger children with garden tasks like weeding and watering.

TERMS TO KNOW WITH THE FCCERS-R

The Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale - Revised (FCCERS-R) is used in North Carolina to assess licensed family child care programs in the state. The FCCERS tool contains many definitions that help inform programs on specific aspects of quality. Below are some important definitions to consider when developing your learning space.

- **Daily** - daily access to materials means every day or almost every day, with very few exceptions. The FCCERS-R tool also uses the term daily when highlighting children's ability to go outside during program hours and having access to activity spaces and soft areas.
- **Much of the day** - this term means that children have access to materials for a majority of the time they are awake during program hours. Much of the day also refers to child access to specific areas like soft spaces and activity centers.
- **Accessible** - For a material to be accessible it has to be within the grasp of the child. Materials in locked cabinets, behind doors, or in containers that cannot be easily opened are not considered accessible.
- **Appropriate** - the FCCERS-R tool highlights that materials should challenge children, but never frustrate them. It is important to match materials with the age and developmental skill of each child playing with them. Appropriate also means that the materials are in good working order and can be used for their designed purpose.
- **Weather permitting** - the FCCERS-R recognizes the importance of the outdoor learning space. Several items in the assessment tool look at the engagements and materials children have when outside. Weather permitting means that children need to go outdoors every day unless there is active precipitation, public weather announcements, or weather conditions that can prove unhealthy to children. Remember that you can adjust your classroom schedule to accommodate short periods of bad weather and still go outside.

For more information about enhancing your family child care learning space contact:

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