

Mixed Age Grouping and the Emotional Development of Two-Year-Olds

OVERVIEW

This research project investigated the impact of mixed age grouping on the emotional development of two-year-olds, in light of the new government initiative to create more funded places for two-year-olds in Early Years settings from September 2013. It was found that younger children need an environment that is secure and stable, with strong attachments. The adult role was found to be vital in the development of children's peer relationships through play, and this could be developed if practitioners went beyond attachment and supported children's social relationships further. The overarching message from the literature was that mixed age grouping benefits younger children cognitively, but there is a risk that it may impact negatively on children's emotional development.

This was an action research project which used the qualitative methods of structured and unstructured observations of the children, the researcher's own reflections, semi-structured interviews with key people of two year olds in the setting, and the analysis of existing data regarding the two year olds to investigate the impact of mixed age grouping in one setting. In addition to the action research cycle within the setting, surveys in the form of online questionnaires were distributed to other local settings who also group two year olds together with preschool children, as a point of comparison. It was found that children's strong relationships and high quality interactions with staff were the most significant factors in supporting their emotional development. However, such findings cannot be generalised as they are specific to the setting in which the action research was carried out.

CONTEXT

Since Field (2010) and Allen (2011), there has been a strong focus on early intervention. New government initiatives supporting early intervention, supported by Field (2010: 38-40), highlighted how vitally important the early years are to children's future life chances, and that an individual's life chances begin to be determined as early as pregnancy. Field also pointed out the economic benefits of early intervention, as investing in disadvantaged young children at an early age would improve their outcomes and cause them to require less investment later in life. Allen (2011: xii-xiv) builds on this, stating that an absence of appropriate support for children in their earliest years is causing many of the costly and damaging social problems in our society, and that intervening at a later stage is often more costly and less effective. One element of the government's response to these reports is to create a new entitlement to free early education for two-year-olds, building on the existing entitlement for three- and four-year-olds. As a result, from September 2013, around 130,000 new funded places have been created for the most economically disadvantaged two-year-olds, deemed as those who qualify for free school meals or who are looked after children, from the term following their second birthday (Children and Young Persons, England, 2012). Local authorities also have the ability to offer places to children not meeting these criteria at their own discretion (DfE, 2012). From September 2014 the number of places available will extend to around 260,000, and the eligibility criteria may change accordingly. Although this is not a stipulation of the policy, many of these places for two-year-olds will be made available in preschool settings, creating more mixed age grouping in settings that have previously catered primarily for three- and four-year-olds.

Mixed age grouping does already occur to an extent in Early Years settings in the UK, however Nutbrown and Page (2008: 91-92) draw attention to a situation where many settings which in the past operated as preschools or playgroups have lowered the age group to admit children from two years old in order to make their setting more sustainable and remain financially viable, as many children in England start school the term after their fourth birthday, even though the statutory age to start school is the term after their fifth birthday. They suggest that in some of these settings not enough thought has been given to the differentiation of organization, curriculum and environment necessary for these younger children. This is particularly the case regarding the learning environment, but can also occur regarding care routines, for example where settings require children to be toilet trained before they can start at the setting, which puts undue and unrealistic pressure on parents. This raises questions as to the impact of such mixed age grouping on the cognitive and emotional development of these younger children, in particular their emotional development, and the potential dangers of widening such mixed age grouping without due care being given to the needs of the youngest children. It is for this reason that this research project aims to investigate the impact of mixed age grouping on the emotional development of two-year-olds. The research is based in a community playgroup that is situated in the middle of an area of economic disadvantage in south east England, which caters for children aged 2-4 on a part time basis (term time mornings only).

HOW DO THE TWO-YEAR OLDS ACCESS THE ENVIRONMENT COMPARED TO THEIR OLDER PEERS?

The findings of this study found that the two-year-olds accessed the environment in a very similar way to their older peers. Most notably, as shown in the chart Interactions with the Environment, the two-year-olds did not make use of the opportunities for containment and smaller spaces in the way that the literature suggested they would (Jarman, 2009; Bradford, 2012a; Clare, 2012). The findings in my study indicate that the small spaces and containment are indeed useful for providing a secure space for less secure children, but that contrary to expectations the less secure children in our setting are not the younger ones. The question that arises from this is what are we providing for these children that enables them to feel so secure? A key feature of the provision in this setting is the interactions. The manager has made a conscious decision to operate with consistently low ratios of adults to children (usually 1:3 even for the older children) so that staff are more able to interact with the children. This is in line with the idea put forward by Bronfenbrenner (1979: 202) that such low ratios are significant as they enable the high quality interactions that are so crucial to the positive development of young children, and without which children in daycare settings may in fact regress.

Palermo et al. (2007: 418) relate the importance of practitioner-child interactions to cognitive development, finding that children were more likely to behave prosocially when the practitioner-child relationship was close. Those that behaved more prosocially would be less excluded by their peer group and would ultimately also display greater academic readiness for kindergarten. They concluded from this that when practitioners have positive relationships with children, it encourages them to develop prosocial skills, and this draws other peers to them and improves their school readiness. It would appear that the findings of this study confirm Palermo et al.'s conclusions regarding practitioner-child interactions, as illustrated in the chart Interactions with Adults. Allen and Duncan-Smith (2008, in Clare, 2012: 31) indicate that it is vital that social and emotional abilities are built before, and in order to enable, educational attainment. Interaction is important for both language development and emotional well being, with a significant proportion of children's learning taking place through interaction with adults. This highlights once again the importance of attachment.

A further point that must be made is that the setting in which this study was conducted is an openly Christian setting (although most children who attend are not from Christian families), which means that staff pray for the children each morning at register time. In broader terms this means that they are showing interest in the children's concerns, as they always ask if there is anyone that would like them to pray for something for them. This in itself contributes to children's emotional security, as it is a daily reminder that staff are interested in them and their concerns. Bradford indicates the significance of this in her discussion of important quality indicators for the daily care of babies and children under three, where she specifically identifies the importance of this orientation towards a child's needs, interests and well-being; nurturing relationships; warm and stable relationships between practitioner and child; and a familiar person (key person) who the child accepts and responds to (Bradford, 2012b: 6). Nutbrown and Page (2008: 173-174) take this further, linking the development of respectful relationships with children to an ability to live and work together in the setting and the establishment of a community of practitioners, parents and children. They highlight that an important aspect of this is that we see young children as citizens in their own settings, and consult them accordingly. Through asking children what they would like to pray for, staff in this setting are reminding them on a daily basis that they are citizens of the setting and their views, their needs, and their concerns matter, and thus reaffirming that they are in a safe, secure and welcoming place.

HOW WELL DO THE TWO-YEAR OLDS INTEGRATE AND SETTLE INTO THE ENVIRONMENT?

Overall the two-year-olds appeared to settle very quickly into the setting. It must be taken into account here that most two-year-olds in the setting in which the action research was carried out have a family member in the setting with them, whether that be a sibling, a cousin or a parent. This was indicated in the findings, where the two-year-olds who were most confident seemed to also be those who had more siblings in the setting. However, the findings also indicated cases where two-year-olds who were less secure did still have family members in the setting, suggesting that the correlation between the presence of siblings and an increased wellbeing in the environment may not be so direct. It must also be acknowledged that this setting is part time, which children only attend for three hours in the morning each day. Goddard Blythe (2008: 224) suggests that the amount of time spent in day care can have a significant impact on children's emotional development, and so these shorter sessions must be taken into account here. This can be balanced to a certain degree by findings from the settings who completed the questionnaire, as the majority of those settings operate full day care.

Mooney (2000: 24) points us to Montessori's idea of the environment as the third teacher, as she believed that children learn a great deal, including language and other such life skills, through sensory experiences with the environment around them. Montessori's own writings indicate that within this she saw the teacher's role as merely to draw child's attention to things, showing them what is important so that they can then explore and admire it themselves. There is an emphasis here on letting the child learn through exploration rather than overloading them with facts. The role of the teacher is seen as being to step back, observe, and then provide appropriate activities based on observations, intervening only to draw a child's attention to something that will inspire them. Children's development is therefore seen as thriving most in a well thought out environment, rather than through strong interactions with adults. In contrast to this, Rayna and Laevers (2011: 164) draw attention to Rosemary Roberts' companionable learning theory, which they describe as seeking to develop a model in which 'normal wellbeing' and 'normal development' are synonymous. Roberts highlights the importance of secure relationships in which 'emotionally charged' interactions can take place, along with the idea that children will develop based on their active engagement with the world and the people around them. This second theory, with its emphasis placed on the importance to children's development of secure relationships and close interactions, would appear to be in line with the findings of this study. In the setting in which the action research was carried out, such interactions with practitioners were facilitated by the fact that it is a small setting in which the manager prioritises maintaining low child:adult ratios. However a similar focus on interactions can be seen in bigger settings through the findings of the questionnaires, in which managers of bigger settings discuss the importance of allocating more staff to the younger children, to build secure relationships which then support the children in setting and facilitate their emotional development.

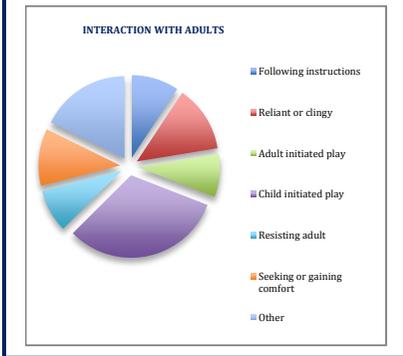
CONCLUSION

The overwhelming conclusion of this research project points to the importance of secure and positive interactions between adults and children. Despite the warnings in the literature about the potential risk that mixed age grouping could pose to younger children's emotional development, the children in the setting at which the action research was carried out all displayed secure emotional development, with those who had been less secure at the start making strong progress over the time period in which they were studied. Contrary to the expectations I had at the beginning of the project, the factor that enabled such positive development came from the children's strong relationships and interactions with staff, rather than from factors in the physical environment. The findings of this study suggest that it is in fact low child:adult ratios and high quality practitioner-child interactions that support young children's emotional development, and that are therefore the key to enabling two-year-olds to develop to their full potential in a mixed age setting. It must be taken into account that these findings are specific to the setting in which the research was carried out, and may not be transferable to other settings, although early indications suggest that other settings who responded to the questionnaires were also finding the ratio of adults to children and the quality of interactions to be significant factors. Further research is needed to investigate this.

Given these findings, it would be interesting to do further research into the quality of these interactions between staff and children, and what causes them to have such a positive effect. This could be carried out along the lines of categories that Rayna and Laevers (2011: 168) identify to analyse adult interventions, namely: making contact, creating a safe space, tuning in, stimulating language production, and adequate response. The essential ingredient of this approach is that the adult takes the perspective of the child at three levels: emotions, cognition and motivation. It is my belief that in this way practitioners can develop their relationships and interactions with children in a way that enables them to thrive in the full potential of a mixed age environment.



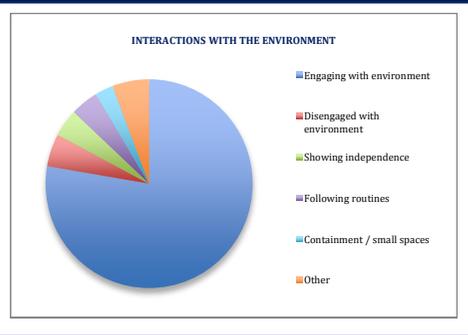
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HOW DOES MIXED AGE GROUPING IMPACT ON TWO-YEAR-OLDS' EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT?

Children in our setting appeared very confident and settled, and in most cases not intimidated by the older children. Those children who did score slightly lower in the indications of emotional stability observations at the beginning of the study made progress across the course of the project, and this was found to be the result of high levels of adult input and interactions which facilitated these children's social development. Montessori (1912) advocates the benefits of mixed-age grouping. She indicates that through focusing on children's auto-education, they are able to have children from the ages of two to five or six in the same room, as each child benefits from the open-ended materials available by exploring them in the way which is appropriate to their own individual stage of development. Indeed, Montessori states that such a room can be run by just one teacher without her being under undue strain, as the children are working by themselves and she is directing them in their own exploration, rather than discretely teaching each age range. However, in contrast with Montessori's idea of the environment as the third teacher, it would appear that here we have the teacher as the third environment, as it is the interactions with adults and the sense of citizenship and belonging that the children receive, facilitated by the importance given by management to maintaining low staff:child ratios, that provide the secure environment that enables the children to thrive, and more significantly that enables those with lower emotional development to make such good progress.



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