

# Week 2 Reading Assignment

## *What If They Wander?* Spontaneous Group Times — Summary



# What If They Wander? Spontaneous Group Times — Summary

(Adapted from *Extensions, Ask Us*, Volume 26, No. 6, Christine Snyder)

Imagine this: You plan an exciting movement experience for your group of toddlers but you've barely started and all of the children have wandered off. What happened? Should you try to make them come back until you've completed the full activity?

First, remember that a child's participation in group times is always voluntary. As caregivers, we try to plan group times that will be enjoyable and engaging for all children, but it is always the child's choice as to whether, how, and how long they remain involved. That said, we want to understand and be responsive to the messages children send through their nonverbal behaviors. There are many reasons why a child might opt to leave group time, and there are a number of ways to respond to the individual needs of these children while continuing to incorporate group times into your program.

Our best opportunity to support children's learning is to approach each moment with an intention of understanding the child's perspective. Consider one or more of the following possibilities when you think about why a child might choose to leave the group:

**The child might need to attend to his or her own personal needs** such as hunger, sleepiness, the need for a diaper change, or simply because they miss their parents. Consider the time of day that group time is occurring: is it too close to a mealtime, to rest time, or to separating from/reuniting with loved ones?

*Strategy:* Move group time to a time of day when most children are alert and into the rhythm of the program day.

## What If They Wander? Spontaneous Group Times — Summary (continued)

**The child might not be interested in the materials used in the group time.** Materials offered for group time might be too simple, too complex, or limited in function and manipulation. Or they simply may not appeal to some children in the group.

*Strategy:* Provide materials that children can use in different ways, according to their individual interests and ability levels.

**The group may be uncomfortable for the child.** Group times can be overwhelming for older infants and toddlers especially if there are many children in one space; there are too many materials involved; the activity is noisy; or there is a lot of action/motion.

*Strategy:* Keep group sizes small; avoid offering too many materials at one time; and allow children to observe before joining.

**The group time might be too long for the child.** When children wander away from group time, this might be a signal that it is time for group time to come to a close.

*Strategy:* Follow the cues of the children. If they have lost interest, move on to the next part of the day. If a child wants to continue using the materials, let them transition gradually and be sure to make these materials available to the child at choice time.

**The child might be distracted.** Infants and toddlers have varying attention spans and are easily distracted; they can lose interest and regain interest quite quickly as they take in all the components of their environment.

*Strategy:* Allow children to come and go from the group.

## **What If They Wander? Spontaneous Group Times — Summary (continued)**

Using the above strategies can help ensure that you facilitate movement and music group times in optimal ways and at times that make sense for the children. In addition, you will want to optimize the use of spontaneous opportunities to engage children in movement and music experiences. This often means intentionally planning a song or fingerplay but facilitating the activity when the right time emerges naturally in your children's day. The younger your children, the more common it will be for them to experience group times through this kind of organic, less structured approach. Keep in mind the focus and benefits of group times: Children's social interactions, development, and engagement can all be accomplished in either a planned or a spontaneous experience.

Again, it's important to remember that it's okay for children to come and go from group time regardless of whether it is planned or spontaneous. Be sure that one teacher is able to tend to the needs of the children wandering in and out of group time while the other teacher remains with the group to support the activity and the children's individual levels of engagement. Taking this time to reflect on how children respond nonverbally to your group time, and to make appropriate adjustments, can help you plan group times that are engaging and meaningful for everyone.