

Week 1 Reading Assignment

Overview of Group Time With Materials



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How Caregivers Support Children During Group Time

During group time, caregivers present children with a specific set of materials or some experience that may be new or of particular interest to them. Caregivers then support the choices children make as they explore, try out their own ideas, and solve problems in connection with the materials or activity presented. The following strategies contribute to carrying out this role:

- Plan ahead and provide active group experiences.
- Gather materials and offer them to children.
- Respect children's choices and ideas about how to use the materials.
- Comment briefly and specifically on what children are doing.

- Interpret children's actions and communications for other children.
- Let children's actions signal when group time should end.

Plan ahead and provide active group experiences

In a HighScope infant-toddler program, the caregiver team meets daily for planning. This is when they think ahead about what materials or experiences they will present at future group times. Building on the infant-toddler KDIs and reflecting on what they know about the children in their care helps them to think of group time experiences that the children will enjoy, find challenging, and be able to master. They might decide to build group time around some materials and simple actions that will be new to the

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children, around some favorite and familiar materials or actions, or around opportunities for movement and music. Knowing the originating ideas and the children's diverse abilities and developmental levels helps caregivers plan how to scaffold (support and extend) and follow up on the individual and group learning that occurs.

It is important that group time be an active time for children rather than a school-like “lesson,” because infants and toddlers are geared for movement and learning through sensory exploration: they are not likely to submit passively to adult instruction. When group time experiences are planned ahead of time, children do not have to wait as caregivers gather materials: group time can begin and end smoothly, and the daily routine can flow, for example, from outside time to group time to lunch.



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Group Time

What and why. Group times are caregiver-initiated parts of the day that include opportunities for older infants and toddlers to engage in active learning. Caregiver-initiated means the caregiver has an idea for the activity and plans what might happen based on mobile infants' and toddlers' interests and development. The purpose of group time is not to instruct children in some area of knowledge or have them practice a skill, nor is it intended to enforce social interaction. Rather, group time allows children who are interested to explore materials and actions, and if they choose, to observe, imitate, or play alongside others. A child's participation in group time is wholly voluntary. Group times generally focus on either exploring and using materials or enjoying songs, nursery rhymes, and movement and music activities. During a typical group time, one or two caregivers gather with older infants and toddlers.

The group is small — generally no more than four children per caregiver and no more than eight children altogether. The adult gets the activity started and encourages children to use materials or move their bodies in their own way.

Typically, smaller groups engage in exploring materials while larger groups join in a music or movement activity. However, there are no hard and fast rules. There may be as few as two children in a group, depending on how many choose to participate. This small group size makes it easier for quiet or withdrawn children to join in, enables children to have close physical contact with their caregiver, and allows the caregiver to pay close attention to each child while monitoring the tenor of the whole group. Group times are a daily opportunity for children and caregivers to communicate in an intimate social setting as they share or use common materials or enjoy moving together to music.

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Caregivers initiate group time by gathering children and introducing the materials or activity for group time, but children are the doers and choice-makers, actively shaping what happens as group time unfolds. Children also determine the length of group time. Some children, for example, may squeeze dribble salt for 10 minutes, whereas others may spend several minutes watching the activity, then turn to play with other materials around the room. To suit the nature of older infants and toddlers, group times are fluid and dynamic, varying in length and content, depending on the actions, ideas, and interests of the children involved.

Group times help children build a repertoire of shared experiences they can turn to in their play and in give-and-take communication at other times of the day. Caregivers will notice that over time, children grow in their ability to communicate and interact with one another during group time. The



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time children remain together in common pursuits will also gradually increase over time.

Group time can also serve as a time when children check in for reassurance and support from others after venturing out into the play space during choice time and outside time. For teachers, group time serves as a unique opportunity to offer children materials and challenges that reflect the key developmental indicators and observe the various ways different children use materials and solve problems they encounter while playing.

Group time is also an opportunity for caregivers to bring children's home cultures and family traditions into the classroom. By surveying families, caregivers can gather important information about children's home cultures, linguistic backgrounds, and family traditions to incorporate relevant materials and activities that can build on all children's experiences

and learning. This may include inviting families to share materials unique to their family cultures and traditions (e.g., foods, fabrics/clothing, containers, homemade materials, songs, nursery rhymes, stories, music, instruments, etc.).

Where. Group time does not need to occur at the same place every day, but it is helpful to maintain a familiar group time environment as children learn to depend on the daily routine. Where the group gathers will depend on the materials needed and the nature of the activity. Group time may take place in the infants' play space, in the art area, in the toy area, or in the movement area. At other times, the group might gather for their activity in a tent, on the deck of the climber, around the sand and water table, on the steps, under the low hanging branches of a pine tree, or in the garden. Children and their caregiver might sit on the floor, on the ground, or at a table — wherever the chosen activity dictates.

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Group times involving singing and movement generally take place in the movement area or outdoors where there is plenty of space for children to move freely.

Since young infants use an individualized schedule, group times are primarily for toddlers. Caregivers do not plan group times for the youngest, nonmobile infants. However, caregivers do plan activities with materials for individual one-on-one interactions or with one to two infants if possible when they are awake. In settings with mixed-age groups, these very young infants, when awake, may watch the group time activity of older children from a safe vantage point. Watching allows infants to be part of the communal action and they will often be eager to join group time once they can sit up and use both hands for exploration.

Older infants and toddlers explore and play with materials at group time much as they do at choice time. During music and movement activities with older children, they will often watch from a distance or from the safety of a caregiver's lap. Young toddlers may drift in and out of group time, while older toddlers, with their increasing sociability and sense of self, are both likely to engage in social conflict and to sense the needs of their peers as they go about a group time activity.

Post, J., Hohmann, M., & Epstein, A. (2011). *Tender Care and Early Learning: Supporting Infants and Toddler in Child Care Settings* (2nd Ed.). Pages 373-376. Ypsilanti, Mi: HighScope Press