

# Week 2 Reading Assignment

## *What if They Wander? Spontaneous Group Time Summary*



# What if They Wander? Spontaneous Group Time Summary

Modified and updated from Snyder, C. (May, 2022).  
Ask Us. *Extensions*, 26(6)

Imagine that you have planned an exciting movement experience for your group of toddlers, but after the activity has just started all the children have wandered off. Or imagine that you plan a group time with Duplos after noticing that the children have been playing with the Duplos a lot lately, but the children stay with the materials for less than five minutes. What happened? Should you try to make them come back until the full activity is complete?



## What if They Wander? Spontaneous Group Time Summary (continued)

First, remember that children'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 their choice whether, how, and how long to be involved. That said, we want to understand and be responsive to the messages children send through their nonverbal behaviors. A child leaving group time can mean a lot of things and there are a variety of ways to continue incorporating group times in your program while responding to children's individual needs.

### **Two Types of group times:**

**Movement and Music:** The whole group of children engage in movement and music activities.

**Materials:** Children engage with materials in their primary caregiving groups.

### **Keep in mind**

Group times are seen as a come-and-go situation and children should not be forced to stay during group time. However, as children get older they will engage with materials in more than an exploratory way and will be more likely to stay with the materials and group times for longer periods of time.

## What if They Wander? Spontaneous Group Time Summary (continued)

Our best opportunity to support children's learning is to approach each moment with the intention of understanding their perspectives. Consider one or more of the following 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 missing 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, more inclined to engage in materials or group experiences, and into the rhythm of the program day.

**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, too limited in function and manipulation, or they may not appeal to some children in the group.

*Strategy:* Provide materials that children can use in different ways and according to their individual interests and ability levels. Include materials that appeal to many senses. Have a backup material that can be used to either extend the learning or re-engage children in the group time.

## What if They Wander? Spontaneous Group Time Summary (continued)

### **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.



## What if They Wander? Spontaneous Group Time Summary (continued)

### **The group time might be too long for the child.**

Children wandering away from group time might be a signal that it is time for group time to come to a close.

*Strategy:* Follow the children's cues; 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 the 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 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. For group times with materials, allow children to move back and forth and engage in each primary caregiving set of materials.

## What if They Wander? Spontaneous Group Time Summary (continued)

Using the above strategies can help ensure that both types of group times are facilitated in optimal ways and at times that make sense for children. In addition, there are many spontaneous group times that occur during the day, and you'll want to optimize on these spontaneous opportunities to engage children in both types of group time experiences. For example, you may be sitting on the floor rolling a ball to one child, but then four more children come over and begin rolling balls back and forth to each other. This is a spontaneous, unplanned group time. Consider that this often means intentionally planning a song or fingerplay but facilitating it when the right time emerges naturally in your children's day. The younger your children are, the more common it will be for them to experience group times in this organic, unstruc-

tured approach. Keep in mind the focus and benefits of group times: social interactions, development, and engagement can all be accomplished in either a planned or spontaneous experience.

Again, it's important to remember that it is okay for children to come and go from group time regardless of whether it is planned or spontaneous. Be sure that one teacher can 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 make adjustments can help you plan group times that are engaging and meaningful for everyone.