



child care

# BRIEFing NOTES

## What does the research say about multi-age grouping for infants, toddlers and preschoolers?

This BRIEFing NOTE is about multi-age grouping (also called mixed-age or family groupings) in early childhood programs. It is written to inform the dialogue about a proposal by the Ontario government to introduce regulations for multi-age grouping models in the province. It provides details and context for the proposals, briefly reviews pertinent research literature on multi-age grouping and examines how multi-age settings are regulated in other jurisdictions. The importance of ratios, group sizes and ECE training in multi-age grouping is explored. This BRIEFing NOTE concerns just one aspect of the package of regulation changes proposed by the Ontario government. For more information on these proposals see CRRU's January 2014 Briefing Note [Proposed changes to child care regulations - Ontario 2014](#) and the Ontario government's [backgrounder](#). - February 12, 2014

### Introduction

Currently, the Ontario government is pursuing two main child care initiatives:

- a) introducing a bill (Bill 143) to replace existing child care legislation with a new Act, and
- b) making changes to current regulations.

While both of these initiatives are part of the province's "modernizing child care" agenda, these actions are separate in that legislative changes require agreement of a majority in the legislature while regulatory changes can be made by the government in power using its existing authority without a vote in the

legislature. Passage of the legislation does not require regulatory changes to be made.

The package of regulation changes includes a proposal to introduce multi-age groupings. The term multi-age grouping (also called mixed-age or family groupings) refers to centre-based programs where a mix of children of different ages (in this case infants, toddlers and preschoolers) are placed together in one room, in contrast to the more common approach where children are grouped by age range.

The Ontario government is proposing two models for multi-age groupings:

### Ontario's proposals for multi-age groupings

Age group	Staff:child ratio	Max group size	# of staff with max group size	Other considerations
<b>Model 1</b> 0-2 yrs 2-4 yrs	1:4 1:6	<b>Max total = 20</b> (No more than 8 under 2yrs)	4 staff (min. 2 RECEs)	"Sufficient space for all children in the group (e.g. a large room sub-divided with half-walls/partitions to allow educators to maintain sight-lines."
<b>Model 2</b> 0-1 yrs 1-2 yrs 2-4 yrs	1.3:3 1.3:5 1.3:8	(max. 3) (max. 5) (max. 8) <b>Max. total = 16</b>	4 staff (min. 2 RECEs)	

## **Rationale for Ontario's multi-age proposal**

According to the government's backgrounder, multi-age groupings are being proposed at this time primarily to provide flexibility for small programs in rural and remote areas and those of diverse cultural and linguistic communities. The government is considering limiting the model to centres which receive "enhanced resources from Consolidated Municipal Service Managers/District Social Services Administration Boards to address unique geographic/demographic challenges".

The government's backgrounder provides the following rationale:

"Multi-age groupings may be particularly important in areas of the province with dispersed and/or small population where child care options are limited. This model could play a key role in supporting the unique and diverse child care needs of various cultural and linguistic communities, such as Aboriginal, First Nations, Métis, Inuit, as well as Francophone communities." (p. 7).

A second reason given for multi-age groupings suggests a pedagogical motivation as well:

"Siblings and family members would also have the opportunity to participate together in the same program and children can interact with other children of all ages as they might in a family or community setting. Such groupings benefit both older and younger children by supporting pro-social behaviors and cognitive development." (pp. 7-8).

## **What does the research say about multi-age groups?**

Given the pedagogical rationale offered for proposing a multi-age model, it may be useful to review some of the literature on multi-age grouping when considering rolling it out on a large scale. Research into multi-age programs points to both its potential benefits and some of the challenges that come with implementing this approach.

Two of the main potential advantages of multi-age grouping cited in the literature are:

- *Continuity of care*: multi-age programs have the potential for children to go through fewer transitions from caregiver to caregiver, staying with the same central caregiver throughout their time in the program.

- *Interaction between younger and older children*: multi-age programs may offer more opportunities for older children to display sympathy and nurturance toward younger children and for younger children to learn from their older peers.

Concerns that are cited when considering multi-age groups primarily concern the safety of and attention that can be paid to infants, as well as balancing the need to create an environment safe enough for infants yet stimulating and challenging enough for preschoolers.

## **Limitations of this research literature**

It is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of the research on the benefits of multi-age groups. Some of the research cited to support the social development benefits of age mixing for children is conducted outside a natural environment, for example experiments using dyads or triads of mixed-age children looking at their social behaviour. Far fewer studies actually look at mixed-age early childhood programs. There are even fewer that examine multi-age programs that include infants and toddlers.

Important exceptions exist including work on multi-age programs by Canadian scholars (for example the extensive study of Ryerson University's multi-age lab school in the 1990s-2000s). However, even studies that do look at programs have tended to study small, pilot early childhood programs carried out by highly trained staff who have a particular interest in and commitment to the pedagogical approach to multi-age groupings. For example, in Ryerson University's program, multi-age groups of 16 children were staffed by three early childhood

educators, all with degrees in ECE, plus student teachers to provide ratio enhancement.

Thus, these studies should be considered cautiously when thinking about scaling up or rolling out this model, as one cannot expect that a multi-age program started for the sake of convenience or financial viability alone will carry the same benefits as small high quality programs like Ryerson's.

### **Multi-age groupings in other jurisdictions**

Two other provinces in Canada currently regulate multi-age centre-based care: Manitoba and British Columbia.

In British Columbia, the multi-age ratio is 1:8 with a maximum group size of 8; no more than three children in each group may be younger than 36 months old and no more than one child may be younger than 12 months old.

In Manitoba, groups of children 12 weeks-2 years have a ratio of 1:4 with a maximum group size of 8 and groups 2-6 years have a ratio of 1:8 with a maximum group of 16.

### **What makes a difference?**

In short, three main things make a difference when considering regulations for multi-age programs: staff: child ratios, group sizes and ECE training. Just as in age-segregated programs, staff: child ratios (adults to children) are one of the most important elements of quality, especially for younger children.

Some experts have particular concern about group sizes in mixed-age grouping, especially when the groups include infants. As the Zero to Three: National Center for Infants, Toddlers and Families states, "We create chaos and confusion when we put too many infants or toddlers in one group, even with an appropriate number of adult caregivers. As the number of infants in a group goes up, so do noise level, stimulation, and general confusion." Ontario's proposed Model 1 suggests a maximum group size of 20,

a figure far larger than any quality standards recommendations.

Finally education and staff training are especially important when considering introducing multi-age groupings. Highly educated and well remunerated staff are important for program quality, perhaps especially important when implementing a new program model like multi-age grouping. Potential benefits of multi-age programs such as continuity of care require low staff turnover and positive interactions to be viable.

### **Recommendations re: multi-age groupings**

The U.S. National Association for the Education of Young Children sets out the following criteria for mixed-age groups:

- In a mixed-age preschool class of 2.5-year-olds to 5-year-olds, no more than four children between the ages of 2.5 years and 3 years may be enrolled.
- The ratios within group size for the predominant age group apply.
- If infants or toddlers are in a mixed-age group, the ratio for the youngest child applies.

Some of the policy recommendations from the main study of Ryerson University's multi-age program (see Bernhard et al.) are particularly pertinent to Ontario's current situation:

- Policymakers in each jurisdiction should embark on a gradual process of enabling multi-age in consultation with the community and in response to what the community perceives to be its needs and goals.
- Before being eligible for multi-age groupings, a child care centre must have demonstrated a stable program with low staff turnover, and a highly trained team.
- Operators wishing to apply for a multi-age licence should submit a written plan to their licensing body outlining how they will

provide programs that are safe and challenging for all children.

- The plans submitted by the operator should be considered in consultation with the licensing personnel on a case-by-case basis and centres should be given pilot or provisional licences. During the period of the pilot licence, there should be increased support from licensing personnel. A stage-two licence would be granted once the operator has demonstrated the ability to provide a safe and challenging program for all children.
- Prorated ratios must be considered to allow multi-age groupings to be a viable option for child care centres. Group sizes should be kept small.
- As multi-age models evolve, there is an increasing need for more specific guidelines and criteria, including items such as staff education.

#### Questions that remain:

As Ontario moves toward the introduction of multi-age groups, several questions remain:

- Would this be a model open to implementation in all regions or limited to geographical areas with unique challenges?
- What supports would be put in place to assist programs interested in pursuing this model?
- What training would be provided to support educators in successful of implementation of multi-age grouping?

#### References

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