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# Group Times for Older Infants and Toddlers\*

BY JACALYN POST, MARY HOHMANN, AND ANN S. EPSTEIN, PHD

*At group time, caregiver Sonja places a dishpan on the floor between Maggie and Sean, mobile infants. The dishpan contains about an inch of water and some yellow rubber ducks. "Here is some water and some ducks," Sonja says to the children, joining them on the floor. Maggie leans over and splashes her hands in the water. Sean pushes a duck along and then picks it up by the head and brings it to his mouth. Watching him, Maggie puts the fingers of one hand into her mouth, makes a face, and then returns to splashing.*

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*At group time, toddlers Conner, Nick, Cher, and Jo and their caregiver Jenna spread newspapers on the art table. When the table is covered, Jenna sets down a tray of small plastic squeeze bottles that the children have been using at*



During this group time, these three children and their caregiver gather around the table to make cheesy bread.

\* The articles in this issue are adapted from *Tender Care and Early Learning: Supporting Infants and Toddlers in Child Care Settings* (2nd ed.), by J. Post, M. Hohmann, and A. S. Epstein, pp. 387–391, HighScope Press: Ypsilanti, MI.

*the water table. “Here are some bottles of dribble salt for you to squeeze,” she says to the children. Conner selects a bottle, shakes it, turns it upside down, and squeezes it with both hands. Jenna tries the same actions with a bottle she selects, and Nick watches Conner. Noticing Nick watching him, Conner takes another bottle, sets it down in front of Nick, and says “Bottle?” Nick simply looks at the bottle. “Nick, it looks like Conner is giving you a bottle to squeeze,” Jenna interprets. Taking the bottle, Nick squeezes it as Conner did, then sticks a finger into the resulting pool of dribble, licks his finger, and makes a face. Jenna follows suit, sticking her finger into the dribble she has squeezed out and then tasting it. She comments to Nick, “It tastes salty.”*

*Cher and Jo dribble salt from their bottles while moving their arms back and forth. Jenna tries moving her arms the same way. As Conner and Nick continue to squeeze their bottles and muck about, Cher and Jo leave the table, wash their hands at the sink, and then take their empty squeeze bottles to the house area. Jenna, Conner, and Nick continue to dribble salt. When Conner and Nick have emptied all the squeeze bottles and have saturated the newspaper, they help Jenna push the sodden newspaper into the wastebasket. “Aw gone!” says Conner.*

...

## What Are Group Times?

Group times are caregiver-initiated parts of the day that include opportunities for children 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 the older infants and toddlers. The group is small — generally with 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 even be as few as two children in a group, depending on how many choose to participate. This small group size makes it easier for even quiet or withdrawn children to join in, enables children to have close physical contact with their caregiver, and allows the

### PUBLISHER CREDITS

HighScope Extensions is a practical resource for early childhood teachers, trainers, administrators, and child care providers. It contains useful information on the HighScope Curriculum and on HighScope’s training network.

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Produced by HighScope Press, a division of HighScope Educational Research Foundation

ISSN 2155-3548

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The HighScope Foundation is an independent, nonprofit organization founded by David Weikart in Ypsilanti, MI in 1970.

caregiver to pay close attention to each child while monitoring the tenor of the group as a whole. It is 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.

### **What Happens During Group Times?**

Caregivers gather the group together and introduce the materials or activity for group time, but children are the doers and choice makers, actively shaping what happens as the group time unfolds. (See “Ways to Make Group Times More Flexible and Responsive to Children” below.) 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 and then turn to play with other materials around the room. Likewise, some may move to the music, others may watch from the sidelines, and the rest may get involved in unrelated activities in nearby areas. 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.

### **Ways to Make Group Times More Flexible and Responsive to Children**

- Keep the group size small. Typical group size is up to four children with one caregiver and up to eight children with two caregivers. Groups may be smaller but should not be larger.
- Stop or change the activity if no one is participating.
- Attend to children’s cues, leads, and communications (e.g., use the same materials they are interested in; imitate their actions and sounds; comment on their choices, gestures, and expressions; interpret their communications to one another).
- Help children exit the group as needed (to change a diaper, locate a co-caregiver, put a tired child to bed), and facilitate continuity for those who remain (recommence activity around the object that was interesting to the remaining children).
- Include choices for children (e.g., books, materials/objects for each toddler).
- Schedule group time when children may be most inclined to do something (e.g., after outside time, after nap).
- Anticipate that children will come and go from the group.

Group times help children build a repertoire of shared experiences they can turn to in their play and in communication give-and-take 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; also, the time they remain together in common pursuits gradually increases.

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 caregivers, group time serves as a unique opportunity to offer children materials and challenges that reflect the key developmental indicators —guidelines that provide a picture of what children do and learn (for a complete list of the infant - toddler KDIs, please see the HighScope website) — and to observe the various ways different children think of using the materials or solving any problems they meet along the way.

Group time need not occur at the same place every day. Where the group gathers depends on the materials called for and the nature of the activity. It might 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, at a table — wherever the chosen activity dictates. 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.

Caregivers do not plan group times for the youngest, nonmobile infants. In settings with mixed-age groups, however, these very young infants, when awake, may watch the group activity of the older children from a safe vantage point. Watching allows infants to be part of the communal action, and they often will be eager to join group time once they can sit up and use both hands for exploration.



Group time does not have to occur in the same place every day. This group time takes place outside, where the children and teacher are using bubble-blowing materials.

Older infants and toddlers explore and play with materials at group time much as they do at choice time. Mobile infants, like Maggie and Sean in the opening scenario, enjoy very simple group experiences, such as splashing in water. During music and movement activities with older children, they are apt to 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 likely to sense the needs of their peers as they go about a group-time activity.

### 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 experience 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 using 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 active learning infant-toddler program, the caregiver team meets daily for planning. This is when they think ahead about what they will present in the way of materials or experiences at a future group time. 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. (You can find a complete list of the infant-toddler KDIs at [www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org). From the main page, click on "Curriculum," "Infants & Toddlers," and "What We Teach.") They might decide to build group time around some *materials and simple actions that will be new to the 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 the individual and group learning that occurs. (See "Planning for Group Times With Materials" and "Planning for Group Times With Movement and Music" on pp. 6–7).

## Planning for Group Times With Materials

### Originating idea

- Think about the children's interests and abilities.
- Plan a group experience around one or more of the following:
  - New materials and actions,
  - Favorite materials and actions, or
  - KDIs/COR items

### Materials

- Specify what is needed.
- Gather enough materials for each child and adult(s) ahead of time.
- Prepare backup material(s) (alternative but related materials if children lose interest and/or want to expand their explorations), if needed.

**Possible KDIs:** Anticipate KDIs that might be observed.

**Beginning:** Begin with a simple opening statement that describes the materials or gives the children an open-ended idea to get started. Choose only one way to begin the activity:

- Describe the materials,
- Connect the materials to children's previous play, or
- Tell a short, open-ended story connected to the materials.

**Middle:** Think about how children will use materials and how adults will scaffold children at different developmental and ability levels.

**What children might do:** How might children use the materials according to their developmental or ability levels? How might they communicate? How long will each child stay with the activity?

**How adults scaffold children's learning:**

- Offer materials: "What can you do with \_\_\_?"
- Respect children's choices and ideas.
- Move from child to child.
- Watch what individual children do with the materials.
- Listen to what children say.
- Interpret children's actions and language.
- Using own set of materials, imitate or copy what children are doing.
- Comment briefly, specifically on children's actions.
- Bring out backup material(s) as needed.

**End:**

- Let children's actions and interest levels signal when group time should end.
- Use a choice-time approach to cleanup.

**Follow up:**

- Think about how children can use the materials at other times of the day.
- Say where materials will be placed for children to find, if applicable.

## Planning for Group Times With Movement and Music

### Originating idea

- Think about the children's interests and abilities.
- Plan a group experience around one or more of the following:
  - New music selection or music or movement material,
  - Favorite music selection or music or movement material, or
  - Movement and music KDIs/COR items

### Materials

- Specify what is needed.
- Gather enough materials for each child and adult(s) ahead of time, if applicable.

**Possible KDIs:** Anticipate KDIs that might be observed.

### Beginning:

- Begin with a simple song, rhyme, or movement activity to get children's attention to come and join.
- Start right away. Don't wait for all children to join before beginning.

**Middle:** Think about what the children will do and how adults will scaffold children at different developmental and ability levels.

**What might children do:** How might children move their bodies freely? How might individual children communicate their ideas (e.g., gestures, pointing, speaking)?

**How adults scaffold children's learning:**

- Participate on the children's level.
- Give children choices about songs and movements.
- Give children time to interact and respond in their own way.
- Keep the group time active (apply the ingredients of active learning).
- Encourage children's efforts.
- Watch and listen to children's cues.

### End:

- Let children's actions signal when group time should end.
- Plan for a smooth transition to the next activity.

### Follow up:

- Think about how you can use the ideas from the children for another group time.

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.

**References**

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