Group Time Treasures: Implications for Learning

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Meaningful group times have been a hallmark of quality early childhood programs for many years. Stimulating group experiences present a wealth of opportunities for everyone involved. Adults are better able to monitor children's skills and enjoy their ongoing growth. Group activities also may set the stage for an abundance of adventures as young children grow and learn in all areas of their development (Bredekamp, 1986).

In addition to bringing organization to children's routines, group times foster well-being, creative thinking skills, and cognitive development (Nicosia, Willoughby & Hatcher, 1985). Often times adults coordinate group time activities with ongoing themes or units. Fingerplays, flannel board stories, and books are used to teach children about everything from fall to farming and from community helpers to faraway customs.

This central focus on group time content is important, but it may obscure the opportunity for setting other learning goals. When teachers or caregivers plan not only what they will be doing (content), but why they will be doing it (goals), group time becomes a conduit through which a variety of exciting planned learning opportunities may be channeled.

Primary Goals of Group Time Activities

Group time serves to gather children at transition times. Whether at the beginning, at the end, or various times between, gathering for group time adds an element of order to help children learn to anticipate and plan. Children are provided opportunities to learn about upcoming plans and choose accordingly. When they know what is happening next, children experience a greater sense of control over their environment. This is especially important because young children so often feel powerless in group settings. It may also contribute to the development of their self-concept, as well as their self-control (Marion, 1985).

Very young children may lack logical organizational or deliberate planning skills (Maccoby, 1980). By the end of the preschool years, older preschoolers are better equipped to exercise self-control and reflect on the consequences of their own actions (Marion, 1985). Well-thought-out group times provide children a sense of focus and commitment to activities, as well as a behavior management tool, as they grow through various developmental stages.

Group time serves to stimulate thinking and introduce concepts. For toddlers and young preschoolers, representational thought emerges through developing concepts and spoken vo-
Preschooler progress from observing and describing events to attempting explanations (Genishi, 1986). Group time activities offer an effective means of stimulating interest in language within a social setting.

Activities involving shapes, colors, numbers, opposites, the senses, relationships, and classification are exciting and educational when learned with others. Learning new vocabulary through stories, songs, and conversation facilitates the understanding of words in different contexts. By learning to connect words and images, children expand their understanding of the world, as well as their vocabularies.

Group time serves to develop listening skills. Learning to listen to others is a valuable lifetime skill. Toddlers do not easily respond to each others’ specific verbalizations (Mueller & Lucas, 1975); their ability to listen is often overshadowed by their need to talk (Schickendanz, Schickendanz & Forsyth, 1988). By the preschool years, children’s increased mastery of oral language allows interactions of highly coordinated verbal exchange (Genishi, 1986).

Thus, group time not only fosters the notion that listening is “fun,” but also that it is useful. Other skills including auditory and visual discrimination, following directions, and social awareness are gained through learning to be attentive at group time.

Group time serves to foster social development. Young children’s socialization is enhanced when they are allowed to fantasize within the context of the subculture of childhood. Social competency is encouraged when children are led on imaginary journeys, add their own ideas to storymaking, and relate current to past experiences (Genishi, 1986).

Toddlers and young preschoolers generally engage in object-centered play which focuses primarily on a common interest (Nicosea et al., 1985). Older preschoolers extend this interest to new people, especially peers (Marion, 1985). This interest may be manifested in a child’s tone of voice, body posture, and facial expression. All these may be delightfully manipulated in a flexible group time activity.

Additionally, a sense of cooperation is fostered as young children learn to be leaders, as well as followers. As these kinds of experiences are afforded during group times, children learn from each other, as well as adults.

Group time serves to nurture emotional growth. Group time creates an ideal setting in which to offer emotionally tenous preschoolers psychological contact and comfort through exchanges of words, smiles, and looks. This may be an opportunity by which an apprehensive youngster learns that it is all right to sit and watch and still feel a part of the group.

As children become older or more comfortable within the group setting, an emerging interest in fantasy enables them to develop a sense of control through group participation. Creative activities permit the relatively powerless child the opportunity to master his or her environment. This sense of power can then be translated into a feeling of security (Marion, 1985). Group time activities may also facilitate resolution of group conflicts and provide alternate solutions for unacceptable behavior.

Group time serves to develop a sense of community and a joy of living. As children in this country spend decreasing amounts of time at home and increasing amounts of time in the care of others, opportunities which foster belonging become crucial. Children learn about their own importance and worth by the place that is made for them in all the settings which affect their lives. Group times which make children feel welcome and important in developmentally appropriate ways give the very clear message “You are valuable to us — you belong here!”

With all of these primary goals in mind, teachers and caregivers can relate activities to specific objectives through the use of a variety of ideas and materials. Goals can then be achieved through utilization of an effective group time format.

Despite the advantages of creative, spontaneous activities, group times are most successful when they are organized around an identifiable format (Genishi, 1986). Certain elements must exist within the structure of the group time to maintain the adult’s sense of control, as well as the child’s sense of spontaneity. A wide variety of teaching styles are adaptable to the following four step group time plan.

Steps to Leading a Successful Group Time

Step 1. Achieve children’s attention.

Successful group times ideally begin with all children listening and ready to participate. However, children and adults are rarely ready to begin an activity at precisely the same moment. Young listeners may be attracted to a group time unobtrusively. This may be accomplished positively by singing a direction or starting an activity which draws children to the meeting place.

The adult may dim a light, play a familiar tune, sing a direction, start an animated story or other irresistible activity. Many teachers or caregivers create an original tune or piggyback a familiar melody, such as:

(Tune: Farmer in the Dell)
Meet me on the rug.
Oh meet me on the rug.
Hi, ho the derry oh.
Meet me on the rug.

Singing several times as children gather or repeating the enticing activity may be effective. If sounds do not work well, a direction or fingerplay may be substituted:

Clap your hands like this.
Clap your hand like this.
Clap your hands with all your friends
And meet me on the rug.
(Subsequent verses might include):
Stomp your feet like this or Blink your eyes like this.

By utilizing an inviting activity, children’s attention is drawn quickly. This is more positive (and often times more effective) than demanding, “When you are all quiet, we will begin.”

Sometimes children come to the group time excited and noisy. A quieting fingerplay works wonders: