



Teaching a Group of Twos Through Fives

There are times when one class of preschool-aged children may range from two years to five or six years of age. It's important for a teacher of any class containing such a large developmental span to be well prepared! Such an enormous span of development requires that a teacher tailor some activities so that each child learns best at his or her own level of development.

To a degree, younger children will enjoy being with the "big kids" and will be attracted to the activities in which older children are involved. Generally speaking, however, the younger the child, the more easily he or she will be distracted. Therefore, the younger child needs more direct, firsthand activity for effective learning. So that all activities need not be set at the level of the very youngest ones, divide the class into older and younger groups as time and helpers allow. If materials are used with older children that are not suitable for use by younger children, provide careful supervision at all times.

Use the activity center method.

Keep at least one helper or teacher with each group to observe and talk with children. As you rotate these groups through the centers, let every child explore at his or her own pace. Keep in mind that younger children have shorter attention spans and are likely to move between activities more frequently. Older children will be able to focus longer.

If some children don't stay in their age-related groups, don't panic. Such a natural adjustment is probably best! As teachers and helpers get to know each child, they can be observant as children interact. They will then be better able to adjust members, times and activities for any group as needed.

Plan to use activities that are open-ended.

When children are all expected to produce the same craft item, the activity will require a great deal of adult intervention (and result in a great deal of adult frustration!). Instead, give children creative materials and let each one work at an individual level.



Engage children in conversation about the process of what they are doing.

“Tell me about your picture.” “I see lots of dots on your page. What color are your dots?” “Which kind of dough is softer? Which one do you like best?” Talk about colors and shapes you see, what the child seems to be enjoying, etc. Especially in a class of mixed ages, don’t focus on activities where a finished product is the goal. This avoids comparison (older ones have already heard this kind of thing from even older children) and eliminates frustration.

Many early childhood activities can be stretched to fit different ability levels.

For example, if making a collage of magazine pictures, a two-year-old may have finished after gluing two or three pictures, a three-year-old may want to cover the entire paper, a four-year-old may want to trim the pictures before gluing and a five-year-old may want to dictate captions for each picture. Wise teachers of mixed ages will choose activities that will provide each age level with successful participation.

During Bible story time, having at least one teacher and one helper for each group makes it possible to schedule two story times. Even better, keeping the story time as an activity center through which groups rotate makes it possible to tailor the story to each particular group. This way, all children are taught the Bible story on their own level. If this is not possible, involve older children in telling the story. Invite them to answer questions and tell details that they want to share from the story. This not only gives older ones a sense of helpfulness and importance, but it also gives the teacher a chance to gauge what children do or do not understand about the story.

As with any other adjustment, ask for God’s wisdom in the situation.

Look for creative ways to see the matter of age span as a benefit, instead of a problem. Your attitude of accepting things as they are and your relaxed calmness will help each child sense God’s love for him or her. As each one works at his or her own level, all ears will be open to the words you say—and the actions you do—that express God’s love and care for each of them!