

MAKING LARGE GROUP TIME SUCCESSFUL WITH TODDLERS AND TWOS

Making it through large group time in a toddler classroom is often a challenge for toddlers and their teachers. Large group time can be a special and important part of your child care day. Large group time is a child's first experience of being part of a group outside the family. The real goal of this time is far more than teaching children to sit and listen — it is to help children join together and form a community. As they grow, children must learn to become caring members of a group. This is a skill they will eventually need to be good cooperative learners in school, team members at work, and responsible citizens. Here are some tips for making your large group time a successful experience for you and your group of toddlers.

1. Use developmentally-appropriate activities.

- TIP: If 5 of the 6 children are not able to participate and pay attention, your activity is not developmentally appropriate. Naming flashcards, reciting the alphabet, days of the week, or months of the year, and saying the Pledge are NOT appropriate for this age group! For 4 & 5-year-olds yes (well, maybe), but 2- and 3-year-olds, forget it!
- What activities are developmentally-appropriate for toddlers and twos?
 - Sing simple songs with hand motions, or better yet, songs with lots of whole body activities (think Hokey-Pokey, London Bridge, If You're Happy and You Know It, Itsy Bitsy Spider, The Wheels on the Bus, etc...) Try to mix 1 or 2 old favorites with one newer song that's related to your weekly/monthly theme. Sing the same songs for a week or two to build familiarity, and then move on to new ones to match your theme.
 - SHORT Flannel Board Stories or SHORT Stories told with Props OR
 - VERY SHORT stories from books with lots of pictures related to your theme read with LOTS of enthusiasm. By short, I mean 2 minutes tops! By enthusiasm, I mean using your voice and your facial expressions to convey the meanings of the words. This is so important especially for children with language delays who may not understand all of the words, but can follow the plot pretty well if you're giving them other visual and verbal cues to help them.
 - Include only activities that the children obviously enjoy. If you're losing them, lose the activity!
 - Build routines into large group time such as singing the same opening or closing song so that children know what to expect.

2. Make the length of circle time match your group's attention span.

- In the beginning of the year, large group time may need to only be 2-3 minutes long and then expand to no more than 10 minutes for 2 year olds and 15 minutes for 3 year olds.
- Why? Because you may lose the attention of even the best-behaved and brightest young children after this amount of time. Very compliant or easygoing children may still remain seated longer than this, but if they're not actively participating and learning during this time, why bother?

By Masha Levin
Infant/Toddler Specialist
Northeast Regional Key

© 2012

3. Plan it out.

- Schedule two large group times – one at the beginning of the day and the other at the end of the day. The first group time builds a sense of community by acknowledging “who’s here” and “what’s happening.”
- The closing large group time should include activities appropriate to the children’s age, experience, and development. Some examples might include music, poetry, fingerplays, games, puppets, flannel board stories, and creative activities.

4. Schedule circle time AFTER a gross motor activity.

- So many child care centers schedule large group time for the very first activity of the day. This is GREAT **IF** your children have been given the opportunity to run, jump, kick, catch, throw, and play rambunctiously for the first 10 or 15 minutes they have been in the classroom, but often this is not the case.
- If you don’t have the luxury of planning your own schedule or the facilities to do this, then *always* begin large group time with a 2 minute dance to “get the wiggles out.” Or you could have the kids “march” around the room or “hop like bunnies” to pick up and put away toys before beginning circle time.
- Many teachers are afraid to do this thinking that it will hype the kids up. Actually, it’s the opposite. After kids spend some time moving around, their little brains and bodies are **more ready to attend.**

5. Give kids who can’t participate yet enough support to make them successful, AND a way out.

- Young toddlers are not ready for large group time. It is best to read stories to the children during a free play time, where children can gather if they are interested. Large group experiences don’t work well with young toddlers.
- Often groups of older toddlers have trouble staying for a large group time, although some individual older toddlers may be ready for very short group times.
- Create informal small groups by sitting down at a table or in a play area and then sing a song or read a story. Kids will come and go; this is fine.
- Some groups of older twos and younger threes can be ready for a large group time, but many still have trouble participating. Keep these times short and active. Have about 2 alternative quiet activities like puzzles, coloring, or books at hand so that children can both listen and play simultaneously.
- Try it and see how the group behaves. If one child’s drifting away causes the majority to go, you know that the children are too young for this activity. You can always re-introduce circle time several days/weeks/months later.