



Rethinking Group Time

Supporting Regulation,
Belonging, and Participation

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The staff meeting

Have you ever sat in a staff meeting that could have been an email? **Why did it feel that way?**

Group time can sometimes feel like that for the children...



How do we design group time that feels relevant, meaningful, and encourages participation?

what research shows

In preschool large group times...

Teachers talk **twice as much** as children.

- One-sided linguistic interactions focused on right-or-wrong responses, and heavily controlled by teachers.
- Child engagement and instructional quality drops—high instructional quality is linked to more child talk and higher engagement

Bustamante, A. S., Hindman, A. H., Champagne, C. R., & Wasik, B. A. (2018). Circle time revisited: How do preschool classrooms use this part of the day? *The Elementary School Journal*, 118(4), 610-634.

a classroom mirror

A familiar scenario...

Crowded bodies pile on the rug.

Waiting for voices to hush.

Waiting for everyone to sit quietly without fidgeting.

Someone is fiddling with something, or chatting with a friend.

Someone is leaving the rug.

What are children telling us without words?



is it behavior? or mismatch?

Our expectations:

- Quiet
- Sitting still
- Eyes on teacher
- Hands to themselves
- Waiting to be called on

Their needs & wants:

- Talking
- Movement
- Joy
- Curiosity
- Emotional safety

Are we setting children up for success?



disengagement is information

Let's play detective – what could disengagement be showing?

- Mismatch in expectations
- Mismatch in energy level
- Unmet needs and stress
- Something else is more interesting
- Too much control and time spent being passive



Why Group Time feels hard

Too much waiting:

- One child at a time
- Long turns
- Passive listening

Remember:

- Waiting means losing attention
- Waiting means using up self-regulation



Why Group Time feels hard

Too much stillness:

- Sitting still is the gold standard - Why?
- Expecting all children to sit the same way

Remember:

- Movement is not misbehavior--movement turns the brain on to learn
- Fidgeting helps us to focus
- Stillness is not the same as regulation or engagement



Why Group Time feels hard

Too much pressure to perform:

- Too much quizzing
- Expectations of conformity and compliance

Remember:

- Participation can look a number of ways... let's name them



Why Group Time feels hard

Too much packed into one time:

- “Learning time” or “teaching time”
- Pressure to cover it all
- Group times get longer and longer

Remember:

- When we overload group time, we lose both engagement and learning



let's reflect...

Who is group time for?

What do you hope children get from it?



Rethinking group time

Instead of:

- A time to deliver content
- A time to manage the group

Try:

- A time for connection, shared experience, and gentle invitations into learning
- A time to strengthen belonging and inclusion



small shifts for big impact

Shift 1: From waiting to participating

- Choral responses: "Everyone say it together!"
- Turn and talk: "Talk to your neighbor about..."
- Call & response: "Old McDonald had a farm..."
- Invite movement: "Show me with your body..."



small shifts for big impact

Shift 2: From going around the circle to flexible sharing

- Popcorn conversations: Practice the flow of conversation
- Non-verbal communication: Create classroom signals
- Skipping a child when they need a bit more time, then returning
- Inviting participation, not forcing



small shifts for big impact

Shift 3: From longer to shorter and meaningful

- 5-15 minutes: Adjust in response to what children show
- End before it falls apart: Experience small successes as a group
- Strategic and attuned gatherings: Consider time of day, classroom rhythms, and adaptability
- Be responsive: It's okay if it doesn't work one day, and it's okay if you skip it one day to respond to children's present needs



small shifts for big impact

Shift 4: From “this is when I teach” to “learning happens all day”

- **Literacy:** Storytelling, pretending, scribbling & drawing, independent book reading, making lists, gross motor play
- **Math:** Manipulatives & block play, cooking, patterns in nature, singing & movement, hopscotch, exploring real-world objects
- **Science:** Go outside, find bugs, dig in the dirt, messy sensory play
- **Social skills:** Unstructured play, creating/negotiating games and rules, noticing others’ needs, practicing repair

small shifts for big impact

Shift 5: From one way to participate to many ways

- Flexible seating: Beyond “criss-cross apple sauce”
- Is sitting necessary for participation?
- Time to wrap up their previous work: Allow time to finish and join
- Allow children to not join or offer alternatives when they’re stressed and overwhelmed
- Is your group time an invitation... or a demand?



small shifts for big impact

Shift 6: From stillness to movement

- Movement turns the brain on to learn
- Movement adds joy and expression
- Movement is embodied learning
- Make movement the default, not stillness



small shifts for big impact

Shift 7: From empty hands to regulating supports

- Provide individualized support:
 - A fidget in hand
 - A comfort item to hold: Stuffed animal, family photo, a Lego brick
 - A wobble cushion to offer regulating movement
 - A teacher to lean up against

Inclusion means honoring differences: Build community, not competition



small shifts for big impact

Shift 8: From following the plan to following the room

- The most responsive thing we can do is shift...
 - Our expectations
 - Our priorities
 - From control to sharing power
- Read the room... and respond to the children's present needs



Do these things

Elements of group time:

- Singing and movement: Model joy and togetherness!
- Conversations: "If you could fly or run super fast, which would you choose and why?"
- A predictable flow: Gathering song, open-ended question of the day, introduce new activity/material/idea, and make choices (and reflections at end of day)
- Cooperative games - Build a tower with Magnatiles, Bug in a Rug, partner yoga.



But, what about...

Worry: If they don't come to group time, they won't learn

- Can you teach in smaller groups? One-on-one?
- Can you discuss the weather once the children are outside?
- Can they freely explore the calendar on their own?
- **Is it necessary to teach the calendar?**

Beneke, S. J., Ostrosky, M. M., & Katz, L. G. (2008). Calendar time for young children: Good intentions gone awry. *Young Children*, 63(3), 12-16.

Kaczala, A., & Carver, K. (2023). Understanding circle time practices in Montessori early childhood settings. *Journal of Montessori Research*, 9(2), 127.



But, what about...

Worry: If they don't sit still, they will disrupt everyone else

- What's more natural for children: Stillness or movement?
- Is it defiance... or dysregulation?
- If children are active learners, does group time allow for that?



But, what about...

Worry: They won't be ready for school if I don't make them ready

- Are schools ready for children? Are expectations developmentally appropriate?
- Why does this feel urgent right now?
- **What are school readiness skills?**
- Can I prepare them for school outside of group times?
- Am I keeping their curiosity and love of learning intact?



But, what about...



Worry: Admins and parents will judge my teaching

- Do they understand child development?
- Can you explain the value of joy and collaboration in learning?
- Can you advocate for meeting children's present needs?
- Can you dispel myths like stillness and quiet mean engagement?

But, what about...



Worry: It will feel chaotic if I don't control the room

- Is the role of a teacher to control the room? How is that working for you?
- How do we share power with children?
- How can we embrace the energy of early childhood?
- Would more control facilitate or inhibit learning?

Integration



Change doesn't happen all at once

- Start small: Small changes compound and reduce overwhelm
- Reflect: By yourself, with your team, and with the children
- Build on small successes: Enjoyment, stronger relationships, curiosity
- Scaffold the learning: Keep children within their Zone of Proximal Development for incremental growth – Don't penalize them for what they aren't able to do right now

call to action

What is one thing you will try?

- Make movement the default
- Flexible sharing and less waiting time
- Teach content in small groups or one-on-one
- Recognize and honor different forms of participation
- Advocate for children's present needs



Thank you



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