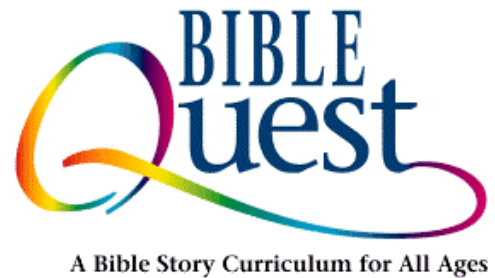


Leader Article



A Learning Community of All Ages

We are conditioned to think of schooling as the only model for education, and, of course, schools do divide by age. However, separate age-graded teaching is only a relatively recent experience even in the education system. Think of the one-room schoolhouse so many of our ancestors attended. Even in today's schools, you might be surprised to discover how much cross-age activity goes on. Drama and music programs often mix ages. Peer teaching and reading buddies are common, as is team-teaching between grades. Often a visiting storyteller, drama group, or other presentation brings a whole school together. All these are examples of Multi-Age learning. But there are many other examples outside of school.

Many Settings

A group of adults and children work together to put on a Christmas play. The group includes six- and seven-year-olds, teenagers, older adults, and lots of children in between. Older children and teens coach the little ones with lines. Everyone helps with set design. The whole group talks together about one scene that doesn't seem quite right, and changes the script. During breaks over pizza and soft drinks, the group socializes, enjoys one another's company, and talks about the play. New skills are developed, and the whole group gains a new appreciation of the Christmas story. No one thinks of it as a multi-aged learning group or worries about the mixed ages. It just works, with everyone participating and enjoying the experience.

Grandpa is telling one of his favorite stories. Around him gather the extended family plus a couple of neighborhood kids who happen to be visiting. Four-year-old Sally sits on someone's knee, eats crackers, and joins in the laughter with everyone else. She doesn't quite understand the story yet, but she knows she is part of the family. No one set up a separate age-appropriate program for her; they don't need to. In this Multi-Age community, there's lots of time for her to learn the stories. In the meantime, she enjoys laughing along with everyone else.

A group of six children ranging in age from six to sixteen play in a family barn. Their game of freeze tag evolved naturally amidst the hay bales. The rules have been changed to accommodate the wide span of ages. The six-year-olds have two extra 'time out' zones, and the sixteen-year-old is only allowed to walk. No one told them they had to create a Multi-Age experience or that they had to adapt the game to include everyone. They did it themselves, easily and spontaneously, simply because the game is more fun that way.

Second-best Solution or Great Gift?

Lack of leaders, too few children, limited space – these or other circumstances may encourage a congregation to consider a Multi-Age grouping. A congregation may feel it has no choice but to keep all ages in one group, assuming that the preferred option would be separate groups for each age. However, what may start out as a “second-best” solution to a problem may well turn out to be a gift. As many congregations have discovered, Multi-Age education programs have tremendous advantages and can provide a creative depth and richness all their own.

Consider these benefits of Multi-Age settings:

- Learning of all kinds can happen through helping or leading. Often the best way to learn something is teach it to someone else. It may be hard for an older child to teach or help a peer, but it’s easy to get into that role with a younger child. In the process can be a big boost to self-confidence and self-esteem.
- The setting increases flexibility, makes it feel more like community and less like school. There may be more room for creativity, imagination, fun, and spiritual growth.
- Diversity is good. The more learners are different from one another, the more they can challenge one another. For example, there is much to be learned from the spontaneous and uncomplicated faith expression of a five-year-old, faith that might inspire a more critical and questioning teen.
- Young children often really like to be with big kids. In the right setting, their respect and admiration can be a positive experience for an older child. An older child’s care and attention can be equally positive for a young child.
- Multi-Age groups do not have the same kinds of limits experienced in age-specific groups. For example, a young group may be limited because they cannot read. In a Multi-Age group, readers can help nonreaders. Similarly, older children may not do some activities in an age-specific group because it wouldn’t be “cool.” But in a Multi-Age group they will quite readily participate, sometimes in the guise of helping.
- Multi-Age groups are unique. Chances are, there’s nothing else like them in the learner’s experience. This can help groups develop their own character and a feeling of being special-a place set apart.

Challenges

Creating a Multi-Age community in a congregational setting may pose challenges. Our culture tends to divide by age groups, and there are not many opportunities for youth and children to experience the positive aspects of being in a setting intentionally planned for Multi-Age events. Older children may experience peer pressure that says it is not “cool” to hang around little kids. Younger children may be intimidated by older ones or may simply lack experience relating to their outside needs, interests, skill levels, and life experiences. Many of us are used to thinking of differences as a problem, something to be avoided, so it may be hard to imagine how putting such a diverse group together could work.

We have a big task ahead of us as we set out to create a community in which learning and faith development can take place. It needs to be a community that is comfortable and welcoming, emotionally and spiritually. It needs to be a place where learners can be themselves. Above all, it needs to feel like a real community-a spiritual home in which learners of all ages feel they belong.

As we set out to create a Multi-Age program, we may have to change our own mind-set and that of our learners. We may have to discover new ways of doing things. We may have to be patient. This is not going to happen overnight. But we will get there, and when we do, we’ll realize that all ages learning together can be a wonderful experience for learners and leaders.

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