

SECTOR CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAM  
**Reimagining Group Times:  
Embedding a Neuro-Affirming,  
Inclusive Approach**

**This resource explores the benefits of small and large group times to support inclusion and participation for children with disabilities and additional needs, and highlights what inclusive group times can look like for all children.**



Group times in early childhood settings can be child-led and initiated or intentional experiences that are initiated and guided by educators to support learning. They can occur as a larger group or smaller group experiences. The Early Years Learning Framework V2.0 (AGDE, 2022) under the principle of ‘Equity, inclusion, and high expectations’, prompts us to consider the rights of all children to participate in learning environments that are inclusive and respectful. By identifying barriers to participation and being reflective and flexible, educators create learning opportunities for children with all abilities to thrive. “Educators engage in critical reflection, challenge practices that contribute to inequities or discrimination and make curriculum decisions that promote genuine participation and inclusion.” (p. 17)

If we look at group times through a contemporary neuro-affirming and inclusive lens, we might reflect on what listening looks like for children in current times. Children’s experience of listening is quite different to the historical views of children who were expected to sit still, with their legs crossed, hands in laps and eyes fixed on the speaker.

For many children, especially neurodivergent children, making eye contact and listening or sitting still simultaneously may not be an appropriate goal. Research and lived experiences of neurodiverse people tell us that these children’s brains need to work harder to process visual and auditory stimuli together and may find such expectations quite overwhelming.

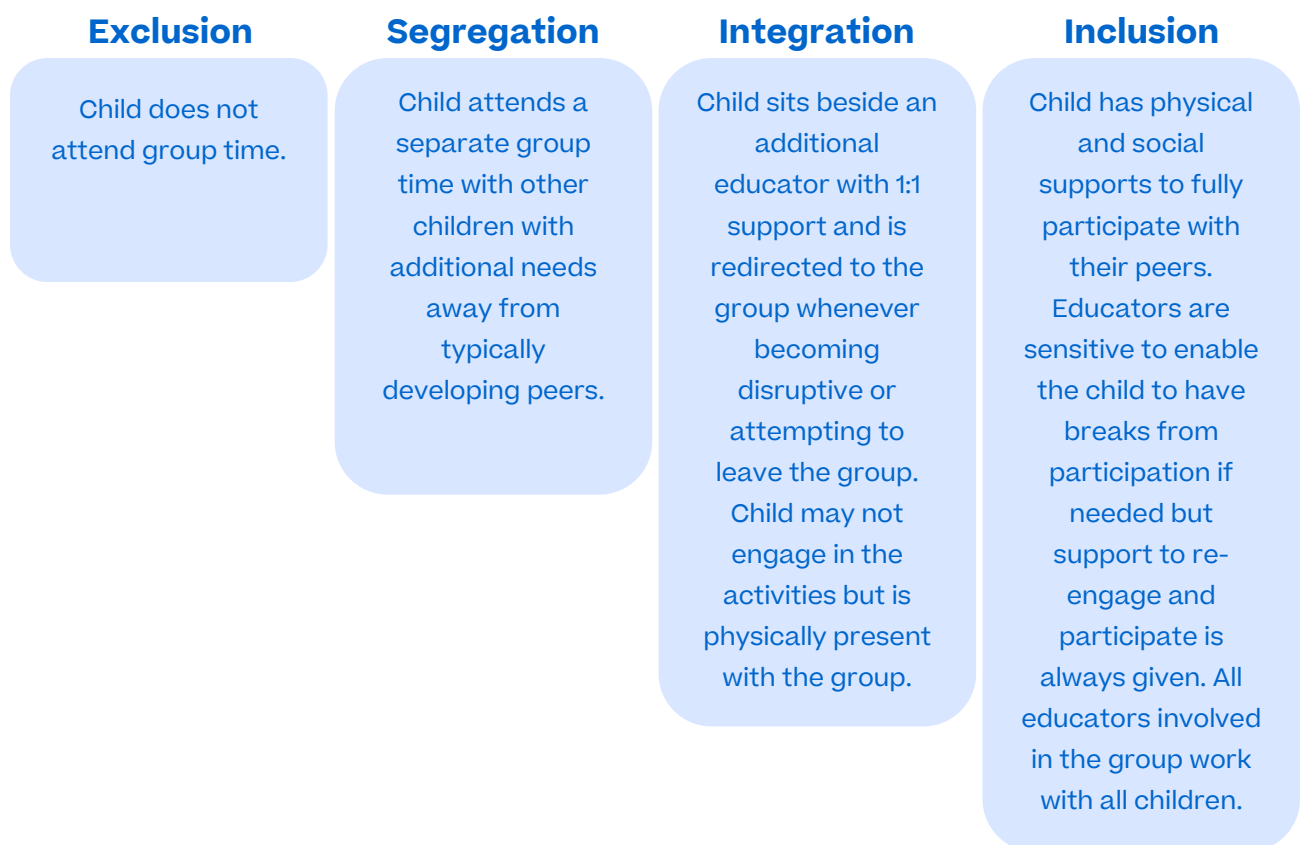
Also, some children may lack the core strength to sit cross-legged for a period of time.

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Providing alternative ways to listen and participate in group times is an essential part of neuro-affirming and inclusive practice. It communicates to children that their unique ways of engaging with the world are respected and accommodated. At the same time, clear and consistent boundaries remain important for maintaining group harmony. For example, while a child may lie on their tummy to listen, expectations such as not rolling around or disrupting other group members can be gently established.

It might be helpful to reflect on the table below and see where current group time practices sit in relation to inclusion.



## Small Groups

Small group times can occur throughout the preschool day, providing opportunities for educators to actively engage with children, build relationships, sustain shared dialogue, and intentionally teach concepts based on children's interests. The small group context enables greater focus on individual children.

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The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) outlines that educators can promote learning for all children by:

- ▶ Organising learning environments in ways that support small group interactions and play experiences. (p. 36)
- ▶ Planning opportunities for children to participate in meaningful ways in group discussions and shared decision-making about rules and expectations. (p. 39)
- ▶ Providing opportunities for children to “contribute their ideas and experiences in play small and large group discussions” (p. 58) and “feel accepted and affirm their group membership”. (p. 34)

## Benefits of Small Groups



- ▶ Children have enhanced opportunities to engage in quality interactions with educators and peers, thus strengthening relationships and resulting in positive social outcomes.
  - ▶ Positive impacts are evident in children’s language and communication skills.
  - ▶ Children are active participants and decision makers.
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- ▶ Children have increased opportunities to express their ideas and to listen and respond to others.
  - ▶ Children’s engagement in learning is supported and scaffolded, improving cognitive outcomes.
  - ▶ Content can be individualised to meet the specific needs of each child and facilitate active participation for children of all abilities.
  - ▶ Educators can reflect on and document children’s learning more effectively.
  - ▶ Promote calm, collaborative learning with reduced sensory load, thus supporting children’s self-regulation and engagement.
  - ▶ Confidence to speak in small groups of peers is supported, gradually increasing children’s capacity to contribute within larger groups.

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## Large/Whole Groups

While there is a great deal of evidence supporting small group learning, it is important to note whole group learning also provides opportunities for children to develop a sense of belonging to their preschool community. Large groups can provide opportunities for sharing important information with children about the coming day or reflecting on the days' events.

Critical reflection plays a significant role in thinking about large group times. The principle of “*Critical Reflection and Ongoing Professional Learning*” (AGDE, 2022, p. 18) suggests questions to guide our practice:

- ▶ What is our understanding of each child, their culture and context?
- ▶ What theories, philosophies and understandings shape and assist with our work?
- ▶ In what ways, if any, do our theories, knowledges, and world views limit our practice?
- ▶ Who is advantaged/included when we work in this way? Who is disadvantaged, excluded, or silenced?

## Some Considerations for All Group times

### Child's agency, choice, and autonomy

- ▶ Children are given a choice; their right to join in or not is respected.
- ▶ Children can leave (safely) when they are no longer able to attend.
- ▶ Children are allowed to have a break if they need to step out of the group for a sensory or movement break.
- ▶ Children have a choice about where and how to sit, and how they might participate.
- ▶ Children can choose their proximity to the group. Some like to be closer for connection or apart for comfort.
- ▶ Provide a variety of ways for children to engage.
- ▶ Group times are conducted from a place of kindness with empathy and respect for the rights of every child.



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## Environment and Physical Space

- ▶ Group times can happen indoors or outdoors.
- ▶ Arrange a space with minimal distractions.
- ▶ Provide flexible seating options, such as cushions, stools, wobble cushions, bucket chairs or bean bags. Chairs with chair bands may support focus and regulation for some children.
- ▶ Define movement spaces are allowed so children can lie down and stand or wiggle within a clearly marked area.
- ▶ Sensory tools such as stress balls, textured items or fidget tools can be provided to help children regulate themselves while taking part in group experiences.
- ▶ Alternative listening methods can be provided, such as headphones to block background noise for children with auditory sensitivities. Reflect on the use of screens in group times. Do they add or detract from the experience for each child? Is the content of high quality?
- ▶ Consider *Child Safe Practices, Education and Care National Regulations 2011, National Law, The Early Years Learning Framework V2.0* and your preschool's policies when implementing and reflecting on inclusive group times.

## Structure, Size and Timing of Group Times

- ▶ Group times can be either intentional or spontaneous, with thought given to appropriate size, flexibility, and responsiveness.
- ▶ Small groups can be held while other children are playing, but try not to remove children from the play they are engaged in.
- ▶ Consider taking the group time to the child if this may be helpful to avoid the child needing to make a further transition to a different location to participate.
- ▶ The length of the group time will depend on the children's engagement and may need to be adjusted (as a guide, 10–15 minutes is developmentally appropriate for most preschoolers).
- ▶ Ideally, content should include a balance of passive and active engagement.



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- ▶ Communicate your intentions to offer a small group time with other educators and plan for the team to remain aware of the needs of the remainder of the group.

## **Educator Roles and Interaction**

- ▶ Consider re-distributing power and having educators sit at the same level as children to allow for improved connection, collaboration, and co-operation.
- ▶ Think about where other educators are sitting and the roles each educator plays in the group. Apart from the educator who is leading the group time, other educators can support children to co-regulate or provide side-by-side support if needed.

## **Content, Methods and Resources**

- ▶ Group times need to be fun and playful.
- ▶ Base group times on children's interests or project topics. Children's learning and motivation increases when concepts are aligned to interests and preferences.
- ▶ Content needs to reflect children's cultures, strengths, backgrounds, and interests.
- ▶ Present information in multiple ways such as through movement, books, IT, songs, props, photos, figurines, puppets etc. visual Supports or storyboards can be used to aid comprehension, focus and expectations.
- ▶ Consider a variety of experiences which may include drama, puppetry, cooking, board games, card games, discussions, group games, music and movement sessions, role playing, storytelling, or construction with various materials (e.g. making a car garage). Brain/body experiences such as yoga and mindfulness can be helpful for supporting executive functioning and self-regulation skills.
- ▶ Allow scaffolded opportunities for building communication/pragmatic skills: free-flowing conversation, listening to each other and verbal and non-verbal turn-taking.

## **Transitions**

Transitions to and from group times will impact the way children enter and engage with the experiences offered and how they subsequently re-enter play or other routine spaces, therefore it is important to consider and plan for these. Provision of a calm entry into the space that minimises waiting, noise and large numbers of children moving together, sets the tone for children to arrive focussed and emotionally



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regulated. Supporting children to choose their play space or move into the next part of the routine (for example lunch or rest), as group times end, assists them to confidently re-enter play or engage with the next task. To assist with reflection on this area, use the questions below or access the *Responsive Routines and Transitions Tool* and related webinar recording [here](#).

- ▶ Who transitions easily into/out of group time – who does not?
- ▶ What supports or hinders those transitions?
- ▶ Are transitions calm, connected, and inclusive – or rushed and task-driven?
- ▶ How do we use transitions to build safety, not just structure?

## **A Note on Group Times as a Precursor for ‘School Readiness’**

While group times are a long-standing feature of early childhood education, as with all practices, it can be helpful for educators to reflect on the purpose or intention of group times. One purpose commonly identified by educators is the role of group times in preparing children for school. Despite the best of intentions, traditional group time practices may not align with what we now know about how young children learn best and how we can support children’s diverse needs at preschool. A closer look at current practices may reveal that group times potentially support compliance more than building skills children truly need for a successful transition to school.

Today’s Kindergarten classrooms have evolved from what we may have experienced and while expectations and routines exist, they tend to be far more flexible and play-based than in the past. Many contemporary classrooms now offer flexible and more dynamic ways of learning and teachers integrate play and hands-on experiences throughout the day.

Traditional group times can require children to sit still, listen quietly, and follow adult-led routines—skills or behaviours that may look like ‘readiness’ but do not necessarily encourage autonomy, curiosity, or emotional resilience that children need for a successful transition to school and life.

Participation in group time alone does not equate to school readiness. True ‘readiness’ for school involves social, emotional, and executive functioning skills and these are best developed through responsive, play-based, and individualised interactions. While the content and learning outcomes of group times matter, it is the relationships, experiences, and environments that support development of skills which ultimately have the most lasting impact on school readiness and long-term learning success. Advocating for children’s rights to ‘being, belonging and becoming,’ means protecting early childhood programs to emphasise imaginative play, social connection, and exploration.

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The key qualities of early childhood programs, such as play, curiosity and joy can be compromised when practices focus on mirroring formal school contexts. As educators, we have a responsibility to withstand pressures to prepare children for school at the expense of honouring their childhood.

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