

## CLASS Observations in Mixed-Age Classrooms

Multi-age grouping can present challenges when using the CLASS™ measure. To guide coding and decision making, consider the following suggestions for planning and conducting observations in mixed-age classrooms.

### Planning Observations

#### 1. Consider the classroom characteristics in advance

Identifying which classrooms operate as multi-age groups and knowing the span of children's ages is useful in determining the most appropriate CLASS measure(s) to use, so it is helpful to gather this information from program personnel when planning your observations. Keep in mind that enrollment can fluctuate, and children can move from one age level to the next over time.

#### 2. Determine which measure(s) to use

In addition to knowing the span of children's ages, also consider the goals of the observation and the expertise of coders when determining which measure(s) to use for observations in mixed-age classrooms. A few questions to guide this decision might include

- Is the goal of the observation to assess the overall classroom quality for all children, or are you interested in assessing the quality of the classroom interactions related to a particular age level?
- On what age level(s) are your observers certified?
- Do your observers have a high degree of familiarity and comfort with the age level(s) in which they are certified?

Based on our work with family child care homes, we recommend using two age levels to capture the experiences of the majority of children in the setting: for example, the Infant and Toddler CLASS measures; or the Toddler and Pre-K CLASS measures. Observers may alternate between age levels, getting three cycles of each within one classroom visit, or make two visits, observing one age level at the first and another at the second.

Using two age levels is especially helpful if the data will be used to give feedback to the care provider, as caregivers may unwittingly provide more effective interactions to one age level of children than another. Caregivers working with children across a large age range may need extra support in thinking through how to provide effective experiences to all children in their care, and feedback on multiple age levels may spur those important conversations.

However, if the purpose of the observation is to assess classroom interactions for a particular age group (for example, only the Pre-K children in the multi-age classroom) or if coders find it too challenging to switch age levels, it may be appropriate to use one measure. In this case, we suggest selecting the tool that corresponds to the majority of children in the setting.

#### 3. Establish an observation protocol

For consistent implementation, a clear observation protocol should be established prior to conducting CLASS observations. This protocol may vary slightly among organizations and might include the purpose of the observations, the number of classrooms to be observed, how many observations will be conducted, etc. It may be helpful to also address challenges that might arise for coders, such as

- How many children in the classroom (or target age level) need to be present in order to observe?
- What happens if the majority of infants or toddlers go down for a mid-morning nap?

#### 4. Ensure that observers are certified

If observers may be observing using multiple CLASS measures, they must be currently certified on each and have the appropriate tools (CLASS manuals and score sheets) to be able to switch between measures.

### **Conducting Observations**

#### 1. Follow the observation protocol

To ensure consistency, observers should follow the established observation protocol, whether it requires the observer to decide which measure to use based on attendance that day in the classroom—or whether which measure to use has been determined in advance based on other considerations.

#### 2. Focus on the interactions that impact the target age

When coding with any CLASS tool, you are evaluating the effectiveness of interactions for the target age level. Interactions with children outside of the target age level are only considered in coding if they enhance or detract from those experienced by the intended children. For example, a teacher may have wonderful, warm interactions with an infant during a diaper change, but if you are observing with the Toddler CLASS measure, and the toddlers are not involved, you would not code those interactions. On the other hand, if the teacher involves toddlers in care by asking them to get a diaper or help wash the baby's hands, those interactions would be considered in coding.

#### 3. Consider the interactions of multiple adults

In any classroom setting, multiple adults may be present during the observation, requiring the observer to consider how each adult is interacting with children and how they jointly influence the overall classroom experience. In a multi-age setting, the observer may also need to keep the target age range in mind and pay particular attention to the interactions associated with those ages.

For example, an observer using the Pre-K measure in a classroom with children ranging from 30 months to 5 years might see a teacher interacting with a few younger children in a loft area but focus the observation on another teacher who is guiding preschool age children through an art experience, since 3–5 years is the target age range.

#### 4. Remain grounded

When alternating between tools, it's imperative that observers refer to the appropriate CLASS manual when determining codes to avoid miscoding similarly named dimensions.