

WECAN Survey

Collated by Stephen Spitalny

In January 2004, WECAN sent a survey to all of its member groups and individuals. Sixty-five surveys were returned with a plethora of information, more information than was possible to summarize. Some of the areas of response had to be left out of this summary. Collating the results was a challenging task since so many written answers to the questions were submitted. So what follows is an attempt to summarize the results and give a flavor of the thoughts behind the answers when possible. Where it is stated "most common age range for Nursery/Preschool," that signifies "the most common age range

only among the programs that responded." Of the many programs that responded, some are early childhood programs connected to or part of a Waldorf school and some are Waldorf home-based kindergarten/preschool programs. Semantics makes summarizing the results challenging, because there are not commonly used names to describe similar programs. What is a preschool as different than a Nursery program, for example? With all the preceding in mind, the following survey results are offered.

Thanks to all the many who responded.

Approx. Age Ranges in Kindergartens	Number of Programs Reporting
3 to 6.5	22
4 to 6.5	15
5 to 6.5	5

The most common age range for the kindergartens that responded is a mixed-age group of three- to six-year-olds.

Nursery/Preschool Age Ranges

Most start at two-and-a-half or three-years-old and include up to four-and-a-half or five-years-old. Many of the respondents are home-based programs. The most common age range for nursery/preschool is from three- to five-years-old.

Here are some excerpts of written comments collated from the question:

Any comments on how the mixed ages are working for you? If you do not have mixed ages, any comments on why not? How wide a range seems to work best for you?

Most who answered this question touted the joys and benefits of mixed-age groups. But the survey was not very clear and precise. There is not a common definition for a mixed-age kindergarten; some consider four years-and-nine-months to six-years-old as a mixed-age group, some think a wider age range is signified.

1. Mixed ages work well. It gives the children a broader developmental group to work within. The older children role model for the younger ones and help them. It feels more like family. The older ones can "revert" and play baby stuff, if they want to.

2. I like the small group (eleven children) with mixed ages. A three-year span works well. In the fall and spring we spend more time outside. The mixed ages seem to interact more outside than inside in their play.

3. We enjoy working with the mixed ages. Some of the younger three-year-olds tend to stay close to the teacher. This works because classes are smaller than some other programs (twelve to sixteen children).

4. We value our mixed-age kindergartens. The children complement each other in their different levels of abilities and give a family feeling to the kindergarten. It also allows a child to be in one classroom for three years.

5. Works very well with careful planning of activities and plenty of time to help younger ones.

6. Mixed-age groups work extremely well. The little ones look up to the older ones and over the course of the two or three years that the children are here, I see them grow from a busy follower to a confident and patient leader in play and other activities.

7. I love working with the mixed ages! The older children are quite happy to do simple songs and movement with the little ones and later they go into another room for music and movement with only the older ones. Free play is completely interactive.

8. I love mixed-aged classes and have been working with them for seventeen years. This feels so right for the children.

9. We have five classes of three- to six-year-olds with twenty children, a teacher and an assistant. All the teachers enjoy the mixed ages, but find it challenging having more than three three-year-olds.

10. In the small group, it works out very well. We are seeing how the circle activity can become more difficult with more children at wide age ranges in terms of attention, interest, ability and mobility.

11. Mixed ages work very well as long as I have an assistant to work with.

12. Two years, nine months to six years seems to work great. Sometimes the craft project is too complex for the younger ones and it is difficult to find a craft that works with the wide range of ages.

13. We are strong advocates for mixed-age classes. It works wonderfully. We have tried same age groups in the past but love mixed ages. We wouldn't do it any other way.

14. A two-year span seems to work best, although the youngest class mixes with the oldest on many occasions. We have been restricted by space the past few years. Next year we will have more flexibility.

15. It works well to have a separate younger group (three to five) and an older group (four to seven). Part of the preference for the younger group is that parents do not want their young ones in a five-day program. [Ed. The survey doesn't differentiate between five-day and three- or two-day programs.]

16. Last year, I had a kindergarten group ages three to six-and-a-half. I found this was too large a spread. This year we opened a preschool so the kindergarten range was narrower (four-and-a-half to six-and-a-half). I found this easier.

17. A range of no more than two years works best, but the younger the children, the narrower the gap must be.

18. Four-and-a-half to six years works very well. We have requirements for licensing for programs with younger children that are different than kindergarten age program requirements. They come under two different levels of government. We find children under four-and-a-half can be overwhelmed in the older groups. Also it gives us an opportunity to

meet children's specific needs in smaller group. Our preschool is three-and-a-half- to four-and-a-half-year olds.

Most of the schools that responded offer parent/child groups of various age ranges of children. Most of the responding programs offer extended care to all ages of the children they serve. Most programs at schools have extended care staff who are either paid hourly (per hour pay ranges from \$7.00 to \$20.00) or on a part-time salary basis with few exceptions.

One unique program for extended care was described as this: "Our extended/after care program is run by parents out of their homes. Three parents have taken three to four children each into their homes for an aftercare program. They pick up from the kindergarten and preschool at 12:00 p.m. Children stay for one hour to five hours (5:00 p.m. is the latest). They serve hot lunch to the children. The financials are separate from the school. Each parent bills the families directly. Fifty to sixty percent of the kindergarteners use aftercare."

News From China

Tammy Hughes

At the International Kindergarten conference at the Goetheanum, the Waldorf Early Childhood Association of North America and China formed a partnership in order to support the development of Waldorf education in China. We had the great pleasure of meeting face to face with members of WECAN who had so kindly and graciously raised nearly \$3,000 towards the cost of the trip for the Waldorf teachers working in China and to present our work. As an American working in China, it was very meaningful to stand with my American colleagues and my new Chinese colleagues. In our brief presentation, we showed pictures of the Waldorf school in Chengdu and talked about our work that began in the fall of 2004. It was challenging to pick only fourteen pictures to represent our kindergarten, grade

school, and adult education work. The presentation included songs from our two cultures, an American repetitive animal song and a Chinese one about a frog. It was a good cultural exchange to teach each other songs. And it was wonderful to be recognized by the individuals working with Waldorf education all over the world. We can now look to the future and work to make this relationship a true partnership. We need much support as our Waldorf school in the far west of China helps the new initiatives and we look to North America for strength in many ways. Deeds small or large are so appreciated. We welcome your ideas on the development of a lively, collaborative relationship.

Contact Tammy Hughes at
tammyhughes@fastmail.fm
waldorfcchina@126.com.