

Age Mixing

Age mixing is Sudbury Valley's secret weapon.

I never could make heads or tails of age segregation. People don't live their lives in the real world separated by age, year by year. Kids don't all have the same interests or abilities at a particular age.

Anyway, we soon found out how children mix when they are left to their own devices. They mix. Just like real people.

When I gave my sandwich-making seminar, I had twelve year olds and eighteen year olds and everything in between. Cooking crosses all boundaries easily. Years later, when I taught modern history, I had ten year old Adrian sitting together with boys and girls up to seventeen.

The principle is always the same: if anyone wants to do something, they do it. Interest is what counts. If the activity is on an advanced level, skill counts. A lot of little kids are much more skillful than older ones at a lot of things.

When the skills and rate of learning aren't all on the same level, that's when the fun begins. The kids help each other. They have to; otherwise the group as a whole will fall behind. They want to, because they are not competing for grades or gold stars. They like to, because it's terribly satisfying to help someone else and succeed at it.

And it's terribly pleasing to watch. Everywhere you turn at school, age mixing confronts you.

Then there's the emotional side of it. It fills a real need for mothering or brothering for a sixteen year old to sit on a couch in the late afternoon, quietly reading to a six year old, snuggled up close. And it gives the six year olds a deep feeling of comfort and safety in a

world where very big people surround them all the time. There is a feeling of self-worth that a twelve-year old gets when she patiently explains the workings of a computer to a sixteen year old novice.

There's the social side. When the kids organized the first school dance, I had visions of a room ringed with terrified wallflowers. Projection, it's called. My first school dance was in Junior high school; wasn't it everybody's? The teachers put the boys on one side of the room, the girls on the other, and from there things went downhill.

The kids surprised us all. Everyone came, everyone danced together. Couples separated by ten years were as common as couples separated by one. A seven year old boy dancing with a fifteen year old girl won first prize! It was a great good time for everyone. As the years passed, the youngest became the oldest, and the pattern remained.

The older kids serve as role models, Ideals, sometimes as gods, for the younger ones. Just as often, they serve as counter-models. "I'm glad I hung around the teenagers when I was seven," our son Michael once said to us at age eighteen. "I learned what I didn't want to do by looking at it in the flesh, so I didn't have to waste my health and years of my life trying it out myself."

The younger kids serve as family models for the older ones — young sibling or child roles. When Sharon first came to school at age four, she had just lost her parents. She was everyone's "child" for her first year; she was read to, played with, talked with, cuddled. When former students visit for the day with their infants or toddlers, teenagers can often be found playing with the little ones for hours on end.

And there's the learning side. Kids love to learn from other kids. First of all, it's often easier; the child teacher is closer than an adult to the student's difficulties, having gone through them somewhat more recently. The explanations are usually simpler, better. There's less pressure, less judgment. And there's a huge incentive to learn fast and well, to catch up with the mentor.

Kids also love to teach. It gives them a sense of value, of accomplishment. More important, it helps them get a better handle on the material as they teach; they have to sort it out, get it straight. So they struggle with the material until it's crystal clear in their own heads, until it's clear enough for their pupils to understand.

As a secret weapon, age mixing is a blockbuster. It vastly increases the learning power and teaching power at school. It creates a human environment that is vibrant and real. The school has often been compared to a village, where everyone mixes, everyone learns and teaches and models and helps and scolds — and shares in life. I think the image is a good one.

Adults have a lot to learn from children too. I don't think I've ever seen it said better than it was by Hanna Greenberg. In her piece called "The Beech Tree." Here it is:

THE BEECH TREE

On a glorious morning this Fall I "saw" the beech tree for the first time. That seems an amazing statement coming from a person who has been at SVS for eighteen years - amazing, but true. Like everyone else. I have seen the tree in the fall when its leaves turn red and are then shed, letting the branches show their magnificent structure throughout

the Winter. I have also witnessed a new growth of Spring when the budding leaves give the tree a pink halo and slowly turn to their deep green color. I have also seen generation after generation of little children learn to climb the mighty tree, going higher and higher, sometimes reaching its crown and perching therefore hours. But it was only the other week that I really "saw" the tree, really understood it. Being an adult, I did not know truly to experience the tree, until a little girl taught me how. This is what happened.

One day, Sharon, her face beaming, announced to me (like many little ones before her) that she finally is able to climb into the beech tree all by herself. She said that Joyce had taught her how, and now she would show me. I went out with her because I wanted to share her joy and because the morning was so brilliant with vivid colors and luxuriant sunlight shimmering in the dew on the red and yellow leaves. Sharon showed me how she climbed and came down, and then told me to follow suit. Now, I had helped scores of children get up and many more to get down when they felt stuck, but I had never attempted to climb the tree myself.

Sharon does not take "no" readily, and I knew that If I was to retain her respect for me. I just had to perform for her! She very patiently and clearly showed me, step by step, how to climb up and how to get down, and I did it for the first time ever.

When I got up to the first level I was struck by the beauty of the perch. I am not able to describe the mighty branches, the cozy space or the feelings of awe that overcame me. Suffice it to say that I realized that I had "seen" the tree for the first time. We adults think of ourselves as knowledgeable, and of our children as needing to learn and to be taught, but in this case I'd bet that any kid at SVS would be amazed at our ignorance and Insensitivity to the grandeur that is therefore us to see and is ignored. Sharon was a good teacher and I will always be grateful for what she taught me.