Understanding Large-Group Time

In the HighScope Curriculum, large-group times are adult-initiated activities during which all children and adults participate in singing, movement experiences, or reenacting stories. Adults plan and initiate participatory large-group experiences that are active rather than passive, move swiftly from one experience to the next, involve brief rather than lengthy introductions, and accommodate children’s interests and initiatives. To illustrate the dynamics of large-group time, we have re-created an actual large-group time from a HighScope preschool program.

Moving and Singing Together

The entire group gathers in the middle of the block area for large-group time. As the children arrive, Sam, a teacher, sits down and leans back on his hands, bending his knees and lifting his feet up and down. “Tap, tap, tap your feet, tap them on the rug,” he sings to the tune of “Row, Row, Row Your Boat.” “Tap, tap, tap your feet, tap them on the rug.” The children join in sitting like Sam, singing, and tapping their feet.

“I’ve got an idea,” says Anna at the end of the verse, “your nose!” She sings and demonstrates, “Tap, tap, tap your nose, tap it with your fingers.”

Sam, Beth (also a teacher), and the other children join in. Petey, Callie, and Bryant offer variations for everyone to try — “Pound your hands,” “Clap your knees,” and “Shake your head.”

After the last variation, Beth says, “I’ve got a new song with four movements. The first one is marching. See if you can do some marching.” The children and Sam march in various directions about the block area.

“Okay, marchers,” says Beth. “The next movement is up. Try stretching up tall.”

The children try this out on their own. “Look, I can go really high,” says Kenneth. “Me too!” “Me too!”

After the children have tried stretching up, Beth says, “The next movement is down. Try bending and reaching way down to the floor.” Some children bend and touch the floor; others crouch.

“The last movement is halfway up,” Beth says. “It’s in between down and up. See if you can make yourself halfway up.” She waits to see how children will interpret this idea. When some have decided on a crouching stand and others are bending over, Beth says, “Here’s the song that goes with these movements, and she sings “The Noble Duke of York.” The children and Sam join in with words and phrases on the next several times through the song. The last time, they try out the movements as they sing.

When they are finished singing “The Noble Duke of York,” Sam says, “When I turn on the ‘boing-boing’ music, you can move any way the music makes you want to move.” He turns on a musical selection that sounds like rubber bands stretching and contracting.

“This is the funny jumping music,” Kenneth says, as the children laugh and bounce, bend, jump, and stretch.

When the music ends, several children say, “Let’s do it again.”

“Okay,” says Sam, “but this time, think of a way to move to the coat rack so we can put on our coats for outside time.” He plays the music again, and he, Beth, and the children hop, bounce, stretch, and “boing” over to the coat rack.

What is large-group time?

Since ancient times peoples of all cultures have gathered around fires, on hilltops, in clearings, or along the shore to sing, dance, tell stories, and exchange information. In a similar spirit, children and adults in a HighScope preschool program gather together at large-group times for about 10 to 15 minutes each day for companionship, the sharing of creative movement and music ideas, and the enjoyment of doing things together as a community.
**Children and adults together**

Large-group time involves the entire group of children and all the members of the adult teaching team. Everyone participates in singing, movement experiences, and reenacting stories. Large-group time is active learning in a whole-group setting. The focus is on an enjoyable experience that everyone in the classroom can share together.

**Active learning in a communal setting**

At large-group time, adults introduce the activity but then the children make choices about what song to sing, how to change the words or gestures of a song or chant, whether and how to play musical instruments, how to move their bodies, what animals to pretend to be, how to use balls or scarves to accompany their movements or instrumental music, or what storytelling props to use. Children share their ideas and observations and receive adult support for their initiatives. All the ingredients of active learning are present:

**Materials**: Children can use their bodies, voices, or props.

**Manipulation**: Children use their bodies, voices, or props in ways that make sense to them.

**Choice**: Children decide how to move, what to sing, and when and how to participate or offer ideas.

**Child language and thought**: Children share ideas, express choices, and figure out how to respond to movement and music suggestions.

**Adult scaffolding**: Adults use nonverbal and verbal strategies to support and extend children’s intentions.

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### Five Types of Large-Group-Time Activities

- **1. Easy-to-join activities**
  - Use few or no directions.
  - Enable children to participate actively and immediately.
  - Include frequent opportunities for children to add their ideas.

- **2. Songs, fingerplays, chants, and poems**
  - Maintain a slow tempo.
  - Keep hand motions simple.
  - Build in children’s choices and ideas.
  - Use a song book.

- **3. Storytelling and reenacting stories and nursery rhymes**
  - Make up simple stories based on children’s interests.
  - Reenact simple stories and nursery rhymes.
  - Have only a few roles or one role that all children can act out.

- **4. Movement activities (with or without music or objects)**
  - Give children opportunities to move their bodies, developing coordination skills.
  - Explore moving with objects first, and then layer on music.
  - Occasionally be specific when asking children for their ideas (e.g., “How else can we move our arms?” “What other ways can we walk?”).
  - Always use instrumental music so children can hear the beat and aren’t distracted by the words.

- **5. Cooperative games**
  - Do not have winners and losers — the fun is playing the game!
  - Maintain reasonable expectations.
  - Be flexible so children can respond at their own level — games with few or no rules work the best.
  - Remember, even with games, always build in choices for children!
An adult-initiated experience based on children’s interest and development

Just as with small-group times, adults plan and introduce large-group times, but their ideas come from their understanding of what children learn (the curriculum content in the KDI and Preschool COR) and what children like to do as they pursue their interests. For inspiration, they also turn to the five types of large-group-time activities (see facing page) and events and traditions that are meaningful to the children. Here are some examples of how large-group time originates:

Lately at outside time, the children have enjoyed running around the circular grassy area. Thinking of KDI 16. Gross-motor skills, 41. Music, and 42. Movement and COR Items L. Moving in various ways, O. Moving to music, and P. Singing, Linda, an adult, begins singing the “Run Around the Circle” song to the tune of “Bluebird, Bluebird, Fly Through My Window.” Carole, another adult, and the children join in by running around in a circle and singing: “Run around, run around, run around the circle. Run around, run around, run around the circle. Run around, run around, run around the circle. Run around and and stop.” “I’ve got an idea. Jump!” says Joey. Everyone begins the action song again, this time substituting jumping for running. The children suggest and try out other actions including marching, flying, popping, and wiggling.

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At the beginning of winter, the children are very interested in figuring out how to put on their warm outside clothes. Thinking of this interest, as well as KDI 19. Personal care and 43. Pretend play and COR Items D. Taking care of personal needs and K. Pretending, their teacher Beth tells a story called “The Mitten,” about forest creatures who huddle inside a mitten to stay warm in the winter. A large red sleeping bag serves as the mitten. Children get into and out of it as they pretend to be the mice, chipmunks, hedgebogs, squirrels, rabbits, foxes, and bears in the story. At the end, everyone “pops” out when the mitten finally bursts at the seams.

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Aware of children’s interest in number words and symbols (KDI 31) and thinking of KDI 17. Fine-motor skills and 32. Counting, Becki, an adult, initiates a fingerplay based on the rhyme “Five Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed.” Everyone says the first verse together: “Five little monkeys jumping on the bed. One fell off and bumped his head. The
To share control with children during large-group time, adults plan the activities and children contribute their ideas. In this large-group time, the adults planned to play instrumental music and to offer the children fabric pieces while the children choose how to use those fabric pieces.

doctor came and this is what he said, ‘No more monkeys jumping on the bed!’” Before the next verse Becki asks, “How many monkeys this time?” “Lots,” says Alana. “What are lots of monkeys doing?” Becki asks. “Climbing up a tree,” suggests Andrew. The next verse goes like this: “Lots of monkeys climbing up a tree. One fell off and bumped his head [some children said “knee” to rhyme with “tree” — an example of KDI 24. Phonological awareness]. The doctor came and this is what he said, ‘No more monkeys climbing up a tree.’” The fingerplay continues with “Seven little monkeys making popcorn soup,” “Two little monkeys playing in the mud,” and “Twenty-seven monkeys knocking on the door.” The children use their fingers to express their idea of “lots”; 7, 2, and 27; and also make up hand motions for climbing, making soup, playing in mud, and knocking on the door.

For more information and examples on ideas for large-group times, see “Ideas for Large-Group Times” on pages 358–359.

**Shared control**

Shared control is the mutual give-and-take between teachers and children. At large-group time, both children and teachers take turns being the leader and follower, the speaker and listener. Teachers plan activities that allow for children’s input, choices, and ideas. In shared control, teachers make adult-sized decisions (e.g., planning to move to music with children). Children make child-sized choices (e.g., deciding how to move their arms to that music). To share control with children, adults use the following strategies:

**Plan ways to build in choices for children.** Children are more likely to become engaged in the activity when they can contribute ideas.
**Take cues from children.** Following children’s cues gives them opportunities to express their own ideas.

**Participate with children as partners.** As partners, adults can share in children’s interests, delights, and creativity.

By using these strategies, children will become active participants — and enjoy opportunities to lead and follow the ideas of their peers — during large-group times.

**Why is large-group time important?**

Large-group time brings children and adults together for brief periods to exchange information and do things as a group. This experience builds a sense of “we” and “us.”

*A repertoire of common experiences*

Children draw on large-group experiences as they play at other times of the day. For example, outside on the tire swing, Julia and Andrew sing “The Mud Song,” then change some of the words, making up their own variations: “Ponds, ponds, we love ponds for floating boats and floating on.” “Listen to this,” Jalessa says, joining Julia and Andrew when the swing comes to a halt: “Dirt, dirt, we love dirt, on your face and on your shirt.” Singing together as they swing is a natural expression for these children because all three have learned and sung “The Mud Song” many times at large-group time. They are comfortable singing together and readily accept new singers and new verses to their songs.

*A sense of community*

Large-group time briefly draws everyone together — to look at new instruments, try out a new way of moving, sing a favorite song, or act out a story. The underlying message of this time of day is togetherness. It is a time to sing, dance, pretend, and talk with everyone. When the day begins or ends with large-group time, parents can also participate. When their parents are present, children often nestle in their parent’s laps. In fact, one-child-one-lap is probably a preschooler’s ideal for singing and storytelling at large-group time.

**Group membership**

At large-group time, children have many opportunities to participate as a member of the group. They express their own ideas and listen to those of others. Children may observe one another and use what they see and hear to copy, modify, or spur their own innovative ideas. They participate in the activities as group members working in parallel or in collaboration with others.

Children can also work as a group to solve the specific problems that arise during large-group time. For example, sometimes children have more ideas for songs to sing than time allows. In such instances, an adult might say, “Three of you have suggested songs but there’s only time for one before the bus comes. What should we do?” A child responds, “I know. Close my eyes and pick.” A child may also be disappointed if time runs out before he or she suggests a song verse or movement. The group may decide that that child should be first to suggest an idea the following day. “Write that on the message board,” someone may add, “so we don’t forget!” Actively moving children may also inadvertently bump into one another. With adult help, the group can solve the problem of how to move freely while respecting one another’s personal space and safety.

**Child-sized leadership roles**

In a HighScope large-group time, it is common for children to say, “I’ve got an idea!” and then assume a leadership role to change a song, introduce a movement, add to a story, or modify a game. Children are never required to lead, but even children who hesitate to speak up at other times of the day may be eager to offer an idea for others to copy. Sometimes two or more children want to lead at the same time. When this happens, adults facilitate the process with statements such as “We’ll try your idea, James, after Erica’s and Trey’s ideas.”
Ideas for Large-Group Times

Where do adults get ideas when planning large-group times? Here are three sources you can use, and several examples of activities that originated with each one:

Content
Look at KDI and COR items in the following areas in particular:

- F. Creative Arts (KDI); III. Creative Representation (COR)
- C. Physical Development and Health (KDI); IV. Movement and Music (COR)
- D. Language, Literacy, and Communication (KDI); V. Language and Literacy (COR)
- E. Mathematics (KDI); VI. Mathematics and Science (COR)

Examples:
- After several children expressed an interest in pickup sticks, Yvonne and Karen thought of KDI 16. Gross-motor skills (Physical Development and Health) and 42. Movement (Creative Arts), and COR Item M. Moving with objects (IV. Movement and Music). They planned a large-group experience around moving with large Tinkertoy sticks. At large-group time they asked the children to select a large Tinkertoy piece to hold as they moved to music, but in such a way so that the Tinkertoy did not touch anybody. When the music stopped, they asked the children to put the sticks down and walk to the music around the block area without touching the sticks as they walked.
- Linda and Carole played a simplified version of hot potato with their children. At large-group time, each child selected a potato. When the music played, they passed the potatoes around the circle; when the music stopped, they held on to their potatoes. Some children talked to their “potato babies” during the pauses. After several rounds, one child had the idea of passing potatoes with his feet, which everyone tried with much laughter and lots of straying potatoes. This camaraderie engaged children in KDI 11. Community (Social and Emotional Development) and COR Items B. Solving problems with materials (I. Initiative) and K. Pretending (III. Creative Representation).
- Thinking of KDI 40. Art (Creative Arts) and COR Item J. Drawing and painting pictures (III. Creative Representation), Cindy and Bob planned a large-group time around making a mural together. They laid a long piece of butcher paper on a paved part of the playground. At large-group time, each child selected a brush and a jar of paint, and everyone gathered around the paper and painted to hang on the playground fence. To get the project started, Bob said, “Paint any way you want to make a big picture to hang on our fence.”

Children’s interests and development
During different parts of the day
- Watch how children like to move (e.g., prowling like jungle cats, galloping like horses).
- Listen to what they enjoy singing (e.g., singing lullabies while rocking babies in the house area, singing “The Eensy Weensy Spider” when rolling strands of clay to make “spaghetti” in the art area).
- Take note of play experiences that lend themselves to a large-group-time activity. Puppy play, for example, might lend itself to reenacting a simple puppy story. A child dancing in front of a mirror in the house area during work time might lend itself to moving to music at large-group time.

Examples:
- Erin and Markie had new baby sisters at home and played “babies” a lot at work time, so teachers Linda and Carole planned a large-group time around being “tiny babies who can’t crawl yet.” They asked the children to lie on their backs and move their arms and legs around “like tiny babies” to a slow musical selection and then to one with a faster tempo.
- One spring day, Ruth and Ann observed that several of their children liked to play tag, so they planned an outdoor game of tree tag for large-group time. They made the rules very simple: When the drum is beating, run. When the drum stops, run to a tree for “safety.” No one was “it,” and adults and children took turns beating the drum.
- Teachers Peter and Becki watched Audie and L.J. throw beanbags to each other, so they planned a large-group time with beanbags. The next day at large-group time the
adults gave a beanbag to each pair of children to toss and catch. Some children stood very close to each other while tossing their beanbags, while other more experienced throwers stood farther apart.

Events currently meaningful to the children
• Seasonal holidays or special events (large-group activity could include dancing like snowflakes, falling leaves, or singing a birthday song)
• Field trips (large-group activity could include moving like the fish the children saw on a trip to the fish store or doing stop, drop, and roll after their trip to the fire station)
• Local traditions (large-group activity could include moving like some of the animals at the county fair or pretending to have a parade [for July 4th or other local celebration])

Examples:
• In the days following Halloween, Helena and Sarah observed that several children continued to play trick-or-treat. They then planned a stopping-and-starting large-group experience in which the children trick-or-treated using an instrumental music selection. When the music stopped, the children knocked on any surface they could find and said “Trick or treat.” The children enjoyed finding different places to knock on (blocks, windows, shelves, tables).
• One weekend, the streets of the town where most of Gwen and Betsy’s children lived were “taken over” by a basketball tournament that raised money for local charities. On Monday, the adults observed the children talk about the tournament and decided to incorporate basketball into large-group time the next day. Using duct tape, they securely taped hoops at fairly low levels along the fence on the playground. Each child selected a rubber playground ball and had the opportunity to shoot baskets. Several children invented a game of standing inside the hoops, catching the balls, and throwing them back to “their team.” The teachers left the hoops up so that children could continue to use them at outside time.
• After a trip to the corner gas station, Carole and Elaine planned a large-group time to make up a song about what the children saw on their trip. Elaine played a simple tune on her guitar while the children made up words and motions for the verses. The children’s verses included “We saw the windshield wipers,” “We saw the car go up,” “We saw the candy machine,” “We saw the piles of tires,” “We saw the mom and her baby,” and “We saw the dog digging.”

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Here are the five types of large-group activities and examples of activities that originate with each one:

Easy-to-join activities
• While Shannon helped children clean up after snacktime, Sue sat on the rug and began patting her knees to the beat of a familiar song. As children finished washing up, they came to the rug and began patting their knees too. When all the children and Shannon had arrived at large-group time, Sue asked the children for their ideas on where to pat to the beat.

Songs, fingerplays, chants, and poems
• Teachers Barbara and Michelle heard Julia sing “Do Your Ears Hang Low?” several times during work time, so they planned to have Julia help them teach this song and its movements the next day at large-group time.

Storytelling and reenacting stories and nursery rhymes
• Helena and Sarah used a group storytelling idea with their children that involved musical instruments. They made up simple stories with lots of sounds in them to mimic: crying babies, barking dogs, walking up stairs, ringing telephones, and running water in the bathtub. As they told the story at large-group time, the children provided the sound effects, using their voices, as well as instruments from the music area.

Movement activities
• Sam and Peter planned a large-group experience around dancing with wrist and ankle bells. At large-group time, the children chose how to wear their bells and danced to the drum beat Peter played. He was ready to trade the drum for bells so that other children could play the drum, but that day all the children wanted to dance with their bells.

Cooperative games
• Karen and Jeanne planned a cooperative large-group time around Maypole dancing. Since their children enjoyed dancing to music with streamers, they thought this idea might work, but first they needed to find a sturdy pole. They finally decided to tack nylon streamers to a pole outside that held up their bird feeder. At large-group time, everyone went outside, found the end of a streamer, and danced around the pole to different selections of music. “Look what’s happening to the pole!” the children exclaimed when the music stopped. “It’s getting colors!”
Where large groups meet

Large-group meetings call for a space flexible enough for both vigorous action and cozy intimacy as well as the enactment of young children’s ideas about when and how to move and where and how to sit.

Gather in a spacious location

Large-group meetings often take place in the most spacious interest area. To make enough space available, you may have to move a shelf or a large piece of equipment. One teaching team used the block area for large-group meetings. When they added a music area at one end of the block area, they moved the instrument shelf each day for large-group time to make enough space for everyone to move freely. In warm climates and seasons, large-group time might take place outside under a tree or on a patio or deck.

Let the large-group-time experience determine the formation of the group

Some large-group games call for a circle formation. Some movement activities confine children to individual carpet squares or the inside of their hoops. In other experiences, children move about the whole area. When they reenact stories, children like to build and perform on a platform stage assembled out of blocks. For important information, children draw as close as they can to the speaker or object of interest. Rather than expecting children to always sit in a circle for large-group time, adults in a HighScope program understand that the positions children assume will vary depending on what they are doing.

What children do at large-group time

Returning to the account of Sam and Beth’s large-group time (see p. 353), let us observe the experiences of one child, Kenneth:

Kenneth joins the singing game in progress at the end of the “tap your feet” verse. He has just gotten his feet going when Anna changes the verse to “tap your nose.” He keeps his feet tapping for a few beats and then switches to tapping his nose with three fingers on each hand while looking at his friend Bryant. “What if a giant tapped his nose?” Kenneth says to Bryant, as Petey talks to Sam about changing the verse to “pounding the floor.” When Petey’s verse begins, Kenneth leans over and pounds the floor with both fists. At the end of this verse, he and Bryant continue their conversation about giants: “A giant could pound through the floor.” “And he wouldn’t get hurt.” “Yeah, he has special powers.” For the “clap your knees” verse, Kenneth pounds

Making Large-Group Activities More Child Centered

Use the following strategies to make large-group activities more child centered:

1. Separate: Separate the words (say) from the actions (do).
   - Show the motions OR describe the motions.
   - Don’t talk and show at the same time.
   - For a song or fingerplay, introduce the motions first and then layer on the song or words.

   Hint: If you find this is hard for you, try keeping your hands in your pockets.

2. Simplify: Simplify the words and/or actions so they make sense to children.
   - If the song or activity involves a movement sequence, present each motion individually before putting the sequence together.
   - Use words the children understand (e.g., say “one hand” and “the other hand” rather than “left hand” and “right hand”).
   - Use actions that children can do (e.g., rather than snapping fingers, try wiggling them or patting knees).

3. Facilitate: Support children’s choices, actions, and language.
   - Comment on what you see children doing.
   - Imitate children’s actions and use their words.
his knees, then shakes his head “like a giant” from side to side during the last verse.

Kenneth is still shaking his head as Beth encourages the group to try the marching movement for the new song. When other children begin to march, Kenneth gets up and marches after Bryant. “We’re giants, aren’t we Bryant,” he says. They lift their legs as high as they can as they weave in and out among the other marchers. “Look, I can go really high,” Kenneth tells Beth after she describes the second movement, “Go high.” He stands on his toes and stretches toward the ceiling. Beth nods and smiles in acknowledgment and then asks the children to go down. Kenneth falls to the floor on his hands, then crouches with his arms wrapped around his knees. For halfway up, he watches Bryant and then assumes a standing crouch. When Beth begins to sing, Kenneth falls to the floor on his hands again, crawls over to Beth, sits down, and leans comfortably against her, singing along from time to time. When it is time to sing and move, Kenneth jumps up and marches with Bryant, reaches up, falls to the floor, then stands in a crouch. He sings some of the words and goes back to marching until Sam puts on the “boing-boing” music. “This is the funny jumping music!” Kenneth says, as he jumps up and down. “Let’s do it again,” he says when the music stops. Kenneth is the first to reach the coat rack when Sam plays the music a second time. As soon as he gets his coat on, he resumes jumping until the music stops. “Bryant,” he says on the way out the door. “Let’s be giants, okay?”

As Kenneth’s experiences illustrate, in an active learning setting, children’s actions and ideas play a major role in shaping the content and process of large-group gatherings.

**Children actively participate**

At large-group time, as at other times of the day, children use both materials and their own bodies in creative ways. For example, they march, fall to the ground, wave and jump over streamers, dance their own interpretation of popcorn popping, line up blocks for a stage, shake tambourines and hit them against different parts of their bodies, make up movements for others to try, and assume the shape and motions of characters to act out familiar stories (e.g., the monsters in Where the Wild Things Are). They make choices about how to move, what songs to sing, what stories to reenact, what words and actions to change, what music to dance to, what instruments to play first, what games to play, and whom to sit near. In the process, they voice their own opinions (“A giant could pound through the floor!”) and observations:

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**The Importance of Large-Group Time**

- **Gives all children a repertoire of common experiences**
  - Children draw on large-group experiences as they play together at other times of the day.
  - Children readily accept new children into their spontaneous movement, music, and pretend play activities.

- **Builds a sense of classroom community**
  - The underlying message of large-group time is togetherness.
  - Parents can also join in large-group-time activities.

- **Encourages all children to be members of the group**
  - Children can participate by joining in the ideas offered by others.
  - Children figure out what to do when there is not enough time for everyone’s ideas.

- **Provides opportunities for children to take child-sized leadership roles**
  - Children can choose to lead and contribute their own ideas.
  - Children experience the satisfaction of having others carry out their ideas.
Adult: *(Telling a story)* And he cried and cried and cried.

First child: Whaaaaa, whaaaa.

Second child: Maybe he cried “Boo hoo, boo hoo.”

Third child: My baby cries like this, “Eeeeee, eeeeee.”

Fourth child: “Maaa, maaa, maaa,” he wanted his mom.

They also tell their own stories (“Once there was an old man and he walked around with his hands in his pockets, like this…”) and make up their own songs (“The bird flew up the tree, the bird flew up the tree, the bird flew up the tree, and then it went to sleep”).

*Children initiate ideas, offer suggestions, and generate solutions*

Throughout large-group gatherings, children initiate their own ideas (“We’re giants and we take really big steps all the way across the room”; “Let’s sing that donkey song!”). They make suggestions about what the group might say and do (“We could jump way up high and go ‘Boo!’”).

Children also offer solutions to the problems that inevitably arise when many people share one space and juggle competing ideas (“I know — if you want to come back to your same square, just tell everybody, and they won’t get on yours. But the other kids can change, because they like to go to different squares”). In a HighScope large-group time, adults and children both shape what happens.