The wide age range in most OSHC services is a challenge for staff. Older children (9–12 year-olds) can be a particular challenge for a number of reasons:

- Their interests may be closer to those of teenagers than younger children.
- They may resent having to be in OSHC, believing that they are old enough to look after themselves.
- They may have friends of a similar age who are allowed to stay home on their own and who make fun of the fact that they can’t.
- They may be at a stage of wanting to challenge adults in authority.
- Their interests often centre on popular culture, aspects of which may not be compatible with the OSHC service values.

How does an OSHC service provide for older children? Below are some guidelines and things to think about.

- Ask the children what they want, what they like and don’t like. Talk seriously and listen seriously to what these children say about how they would like to spend their time. You will not be able to accommodate all of their wishes, but you can address some of them, and the children will be glad they have had their say.
- Engage children in discussions about how to meet the needs of a wide age range in one service. Ask for their suggestions. They may have great ideas that staff have not come up with.
- Give older children special privileges that younger ones do not have. Think carefully about whether or not it makes sense to have the same rules for all ages. For example, rules about moving from room to room, the use of some equipment, and access to particular spaces, equipment and materials may be areas where guidelines could reasonably be varied depending on age. Similarly, should the level of adult supervision be the same regardless of the age or ages of the children?
- Plan some activities especially for older children. It is tempting in an OSHC service to provide activities that will work to some degree for all children. Often these are not particularly right for any age group but are acceptable for all. Be sure that at times the music is what older children enjoy, for example, and that some of the images on the walls reflect their interests. Offering choices and lots of open-ended materials and experiences makes it more likely that children will find something that fits their interests and abilities. When efforts are made to get everyone to do the same thing, the fit is usually not very good.
- Design the program so that there are times when children are in age groups.
- Avoid forcing older children to take responsibility for or teach or supervise younger ones. Some older children may show an interest in and willingness to do this, and that should be encouraged, but it should not be required.
- Try to avoid over-generalising and speaking to the group as though they are one. Individualise communication whenever you can.
- Be open about how at times they might not want to be coming to OSHC. Acknowledge and validate their feelings. This honesty and respect from adults is likely to open the door to greater honesty and open communication from the older children.
- Encourage older children to take leadership in thinking about new rules and guidelines, consequences for breaking those, discussions about major changes in the environment. Giving them special responsibilities and treating them as more mature members of the group will allow them to rise to the expectations adults have of them.
• Ask older children if they would like to plan an activity or an event for the group. This is a great way for children to learn responsibility and at the same time have fun and learn new skills. An example would be if the older children organised a disco for the OSHC service. They could plan when it would be, for how long and who would be responsible for what. They could then pass their ideas by the staff and have it approved and then implement their plan. Give them a budget to work within as well. The older children could be responsible for organising the promotional material, music, and food. This will be a fun activity that the older children can see from the planning stages right through to the implementing stage.

Questions and reflections

1. Imagine yourself as an almost 12 year-old in the service you work in. How would you feel? What would you want done to make it better for you?

2. To what extent does the physical environment meet the needs of older children in your service?

3. What activities or excursions would work most effectively for a diverse age group?