



Going Back to School: Sharing a Classroom with Younger Students

Older students need not have difficulty coping with the age difference between themselves, their younger classmates, and perhaps even their instructor. Success is largely a matter of attitude, tolerance, and acknowledgment of one important fact: Every student in the classroom has equal status.

Age grants no special privileges or authority. It does not automatically entitle anyone to deference beyond the common courtesy and respect owed to every student. Older adults who accept that principle can become valued members of a mixed-age classroom—and may learn as much from their younger classmates as those classmates learn from them.

Attitude and Tolerance

Adults returning to the classroom after a long absence should bring a self-possessed and easygoing attitude. The experience can be disconcerting, especially when younger students appear to absorb the material quickly or seem more comfortable with new technology and academic routines.

Older students may need more time to master unfamiliar material, but many compensate through diligence, patience, organization, and a clear sense of purpose. Younger students are at a different stage of life and may have different educational goals. Some are pursuing a carefully planned career. Others may still be discovering what they want. A few may simply be trying to get through the class with the least possible effort. Judging them is neither necessary nor useful.

If younger classmates are inattentive, flippant, or unprepared, let the instructor handle it. The older student should resist the temptation to make critical remarks, correct another student's behavior, or become an unofficial assistant disciplinarian. That usually creates more conflict than

improvement. The best response is to concentrate on one's own learning and set a quiet example through preparation, participation, and dependable work.

Everyone Is Equal—but the Instructor Is Still the Instructor

As Rock Hudson's submarine commander says in [*Ice Station Zebra*](#), "We operate on a first-name basis. My first name is Captain."

The equality principle applies among students. The instructor, however, remains responsible for the course. The instructor establishes expectations, evaluates the work, manages the classroom, and assigns the grades.

Older students may have more life or professional experience than the person teaching the course. They may even be older than the instructor. That experience can enrich classroom discussions, but it does not reverse the roles. A younger instructor should receive the same professional respect as an older one.

This does not require meek submission or blind agreement. Students may ask questions, request clarification, and respectfully challenge an idea. They should simply remember that experience outside the classroom does not make them the authority inside it. Older students can set a valuable example by being prepared, courteous, punctual, and receptive to instruction.

Working with Younger Classmates

Younger students may initially feel uncertain about having a much older person in their group, particularly when an assignment requires close collaboration. Older students may feel equally uncertain about depending on classmates young enough to be their children—or grandchildren. The solution is to abandon the parent-child relationship before it begins.

In group work, every member is a classmate. Age does not give the older student the right to take command, lecture the others, settle every disagreement, or redo everyone's work. Younger classmates may resent an older student who seems pushy, aloof, or convinced that experience makes every opinion correct.

The best practice is to let your preparation, participation, and reliability speak for you. Listen before offering advice. Complete your share of the work. Volunteer without taking over. If your knowledge could help the group, offer it as a resource rather than a command. Younger students will quickly recognize an older classmate who is dependable and generous. Good students of any age become valuable members of a group.

No Special Privileges

Older students must accept that age brings no special privileges in the classroom. Work experience, family responsibilities, and personal accomplishments may deserve respect, but they do not excuse missed assignments, poor attendance, or failure to meet course requirements.

Group projects can be especially trying. Members may disagree about goals, methods, schedules, or the division of work. One person may fail to do a fair share. When that happens, the older student must resist the urge to become the group's parent.

The only person responsible for managing the classroom is the instructor. If a serious problem cannot be resolved respectfully within the group, discuss it privately with the instructor. Do not scold, embarrass, or attempt to discipline another adult. That approach protects both the group and the older student's relationship with classmates.

The Bottom Line

A friendly, relaxed, and good-humored older student who comes to class ready to learn and contribute will usually be accepted—and often admired—by younger classmates. The grouchy, contentious know-it-all who constantly begins sentences with “Back in my day” can poison the classroom atmosphere and interfere with everyone's learning.

An older student's experience can be an enormous asset. It can bring perspective, discipline, patience, and practical knowledge to the classroom. Those qualities are most effective when offered with humility.

The older student has a choice: become a role model and valued contributor, or become a pain in the neck for the instructor and the rest of the class.

Attitude makes the difference.