

Developmentally Appropriate Practices



Overview

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Overview

Developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) are those strategies that promote young children's learning and development to optimum levels. These practices are based on:

- **Research on human development and learning**

Children think and interact with their world very differently than adults. Educators must understand that children are not mini adults and remain current regarding the latest research on how children learn. This knowledge can then be used to design environments that support children's interactive, inquisitive style. Sustained, high level play remains at the heart of evidence-based practice.

- **View each child as a unique individual**

Effective teachers observe individual students in their class and take note of what they can and cannot do to create specific lesson plans and accommodations to support each child's learning within their class.

- **Know age, developmental stage, as well as social and cultural contexts**

Educators who know age-referenced characteristics and skills can make general predictions about children based on what the age group they are working with might do and in what they are interested. In addition, children grow and learn as members of families and social communities, which also impact their decision-making, social interactions, values and skills. Teachers must take into account the children's social and cultural experiences when planning the learning experiences for their students.

- **Intentional teaching guided by program outcomes**

The core of developmentally appropriate practice lies in the intentionality of the early childhood teacher. Each day he/she is required to make a multitude of choices regarding room arrangement, curriculum planning, teaching strategies, assessment and ways to interact with both children and families. As early childhood teachers make these decisions they must keep in mind the identified goals and what is appropriate for the child's age and development, what is appropriate for each child individually and what is culturally appropriate. Teachers must purposefully and thoughtfully take action to direct learning toward the outcomes the instructional program is trying to help children reach.

What we know from research and theory about how children learn and develop:

1. All domains of development and learning are important and closely interrelated.

The importance of a comprehensive curriculum cannot be understated. The physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains are fundamental to learning. In order to teach young children well, each domain must be addressed. In addition, the early childhood practitioner must also understand that changes in one domain will impact development in another domain. As a child learns to talk, their ability to participate in social interactions increases which in turn can lead to further language development. There is also a relationship between a child's social and emotional well-being and their ability to acquire new skills.

2. Much of children's learning and development is sequential.

Growth and change occur in children in a relatively predictable sequence. Because of this it is important for educators to know how children typically develop and the sequences in which children gain specific concepts, skills and abilities. Teachers can then use this information as a framework to guide their decisions regarding setting up the learning environment, curriculum, specific learning experiences, and interacting with the children.

3. Development and learning rates vary from child to child and vary across areas for individual children.

All children are unique and, while much of development is sequential, the rate at which individual children acquire new skills can be very different. A wide range of individual variation is normal and to be expected. Developmental rates are dependent on individual children's temperament, personality and aptitude as well as what children learn and experience in their families and environments. Recognition that individual variation is not only normal but valuable also requires that decisions about curriculum and assessment be as individualized as possible.

4. Development and learning result from a dynamic and continuous interaction between biological maturation and experience.

Teachers need to be aware of the role that natural growth and experience play in the development of a child in order to support each child in reaching their full potential. For example, a child may be born with a delay or disability that impacts their learning

but through intentional, systematic intervention the effects of that condition can be minimized.

5. Early experiences are cumulative and there are periods for optimal learning to occur.

Young children who grow up in environments rich with positive experiences, which stimulate the brain, are able to build on those experiences and optimize learning opportunities and increase his/her learning. Conversely, a child who does not have the same type of stimulation is less likely to benefit. Ensuring that children receive the needed environmental stimulus and support at the critical times is important.

6. Development and learning become increasingly complex.

Young children navigate the transition from being totally dependent on others at birth, to being competent and independent. Their thinking begins as concrete and moves to more abstract thoughts as they move from sensory responses to representational knowledge.

7. Children develop best when they have secure relationships with adults and positive relationships with peers.

The first and most important relationships are those that the child forms with parents or other primary caregivers. The ability to form attachments and establish trust sets the stage for future relationships and social interactions. Nurturing relationships are vital for developing a strong sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy as well as for teaching a child how to socially connect with another child and form a friendship. Positive teacher-child relationships promote learning and achievement by providing a safe environment to explore and attempt new skills.

8. Development and learning occur in social and cultural contexts.

A child's development is impacted by the contexts of the child's family, learning environment and community. It is also impacted by the biases and beliefs that are held by broader society as well. Educators must teach from multiple perspectives, keeping in mind the influence that sociocultural contexts and family circumstances have on children's development, as well as their personal experiences and the ways in which those experiences influenced their perspective. Children need opportunities to learn in an increasing global community and move comfortably among people with both similar and dissimilar backgrounds.

9. Children learn in a variety of ways.

Children construct their knowledge through repeated interactions with their physical world and the people around them. They learn using concrete materials but are also interested in abstract ideas. Children take input from the world around them and form a premise to guide an understanding about their world. Once a premise is formed, they try it out through play, physical manipulation of objects, asking questions, interacting with others, and reflecting on their own thoughts. Because of this, it is important for teachers to have at their disposal a variety of strategies to best support individual children in their learning at any particular moment. Special consideration must also be given to supporting those who have not developed skills in which to try out their hypothesis in order to further their learning.

10. Play is an important vehicle for promoting skill development across all domains.

Play supports pre-academic learning and the skills that are necessary for later school success. Children's spontaneous play provides opportunities for exploration, experimentation, and manipulation that are essential for construction of knowledge. Play contributes to the development of representational thought and provides children with opportunities to practice newly acquired skills or knowledge. This self-initiated practice is part of the process of inquiry. During play, children examine and refine their learning in light of the feedback they receive from the environment and other people. Play also gives children a place to learn how to express and control emotions, to resolve conflicts and gain a sense of self-competence. Sophisticated play is needed in early childhood settings if children are to develop the skills for mature dramatic play that contribute to their self-regulation, cognitive, linguistic, and social emotional growth.

11. Development and learning advance when children are challenged just beyond their current level of mastery and given ample opportunities to practice new skills.

Children have an inherent need or "inner push" to exercise their emerging abilities and to make sense of their experiences. Creating rich learning environments that tap into that motivation to learn promotes mastery of new concepts in children and the desire to take on more advanced challenges. Once children make that stretch to a new level with the support of adults and peers within the classroom, they can then use the skill independently and the foundation is laid for the next new challenge. However, when confronted by repeated failure, children tend to stop trying, because there is also a need for success. Providing the right amount of support and repeated opportunities for

practice are essential for children to reach mastery in new skills. Play and other child directed activities allow children to obtain the type of practice necessary to obtain success. Familiarity with the sequences children follow to obtain new skills combined with what the teacher knows about individual learners in his/her classroom is critical to match curriculum to the child's emerging skills so that they are challenged, but not frustrated.

12. Development and learning are affected by children's motivation and approaches to learning.

In the early years, children differ in their approaches to learning and these differences can impact school success. For instance, a student eager to learn shows more success in reading and math than one who is less motivated. However, parents, caregivers and early childhood providers can have a positive impact on a child's motivation and their approach to learning through the provision of experiences through evidence-based strategies that promote positive approaches to learning. Some of those strategies include positive adult-child interaction, encouraging family involvement, and the selection of effective teaching strategies, assessment and curriculum.

The remaining sections of this packet provide a description of the NAEYC's five key practical applications for DAP within an early childhood classroom. These applications provide hints and tips for putting what we know about how children learn and develop into daily practice within the classroom or child-care setting. Included are:

1. Creating a Caring Community of Learners
2. Teaching to Enhance Development and Learning
3. Planning Appropriate Curriculum
4. Assessing Children's Learning and Development
5. Developing Reciprocal Relationships with Families

True/False Questions about Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements? Circle your answer then check it against the following answer key.

T/F 1. To be developmentally appropriate, an early childhood program must be structured.

T/F 2. It is developmentally inappropriate to put an alphabet on a preschool class wall.

- T/F 3. Teachers should never join in children's play.
- T/F 4. Academics should be a part of a DAP early childhood program.
- T/F 5. DAP does not apply to children with special needs or developmental disabilities.
- T/F 6. DAP classrooms will enable children living in poverty and children who speak little English to catch up and succeed in school.
- T/F 7. My classroom already has a prescribed curriculum so I cannot use DAP.
- T/F 8. DAP is about not hurrying children. It is about giving them the gift of time.
- T/F 9. Curriculum is the most important determinant of learning outcomes and development for young children.
- T/F 10. Child initiated and teacher guided experience is vital to child learning and development.
- T/F 11. Individually administered assessments are not developmentally appropriate for use in preschool programs.
- T/F 12. Teacher directed instruction and experiences are not appropriate for children in preschool.
- T/F 13. All early childhood educators do is spend their days playing with children. Anyone could do his or her job.

Answers

1. **True:** The notion that there is little to no structure in a DAP classrooms is a misconception. In reality, the opposite is true. To be developmentally appropriate a program must be thoughtfully structured, well organized in its schedule and physical environment, and use a planned curriculum to guide teaching to address the needs of all children.
2. **False:** Letters should be where children can see them, touch them, and manipulate them in their work and play. Because learning the alphabet is such a strong predictor of reading, a DAP classroom will certainly have an alphabet on the wall at children's eye level.

3. **False:** Effective teachers can take action to enhance children’s play and the learning that goes on in play contexts. They can engage children in one-to-one conversations, encourage pretend play with themes, roles, rules, and props, and introduce vocabulary and math talk throughout the children’s play experiences.
4. **True:** If by academics, we mean those important foundational skills and knowledge in language and literacy, math, science, and other subjects then academic learning is an essential part of a DAP program. Those foundational skills must be taught in ways that meet the individual learner’s needs within the early childhood classroom. They cannot be taught as finite skills pushed down from higher levels through worksheets and other “drill and kill” methods.
5. **False:** Children with special needs are children first—they share the same developmental and learning needs and have many of the same strengths as typically developing peers. Because of this they should be included in settings with typically developing peers and have a plan developed by special educators to ensure they are making progress toward the goals of the family and the program.
6. **True but:** Teachers in such classrooms need to make intentional decisions on how and what they teach to help close the gap. Programs serving low-income children and English language learners need to give special attention to building children’s oral language and vocabulary. Teachers should be knowledgeable about the learning needs of the children they teach and teaching strategies with proven success in helping those children learn.
7. **False:** DAP is not a curriculum. It is a set of guidelines designed to help teachers develop strategies to meet the needs of all learners. DAP principles should be able to be incorporated into any classroom regardless of the curriculum used with minor adaptations.
8. **False:** The expression “gift of time” comes from a valid concern of not expecting too much too soon. But just giving time is a disservice—it isn’t time that promotes development. It is what happens in the life of that child as that time passes. It is the experiences that a child is having with objects and people that assist them in the development and learning that are important.
9. **False:** A teacher’s moment-by-moment actions and interactions with children are the most powerful determinant of learning outcomes and child development. A formal

curriculum is very important but what the teacher interacts with children and supports learning is paramount.

10. **True:** Children benefit from self-initiated, spontaneous play, and teacher planned and structured activities and experiences. DAP provides substantial periods of time during which children can choose from a variety of choices that teachers have prepared in various centers. In addition to these rich, self-initiated play activities, children from ages 3 – 8 also benefit from planned and teacher guided interactive small and large group experiences.
11. **False:** There are many useful sources of information that teachers can use including observation, examination of children's work, talking with children to identify children's concepts or strategies, individually administered assessment, and talking with families. Information about children should be gathered in multiple settings or contexts and with multiple types of measures that answer different questions.
12. **False:** Children both construct their own understanding of concepts and benefit from instruction by more competent adults.
13. **False:** Early childhood educators make important decisions everyday regarding the appropriateness of the environment, the curriculum and the best strategies for supporting individual learners to meet the goals of the program. It is a very complex job, which requires the teacher to know their students and families well, as well as a vast knowledge regarding how children learn and develop in order for them to intentionally set up the best learning experiences they can for the children in their classroom.