

Applying Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)

The overall goal for using Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is to support excellence in early childhood education through decision-making. These decisions are based on knowledge about individual children and child development principles combined with effective early learning practices. To effectively apply developmentally appropriate practices in teaching and make decisions about children's learning and development, a practitioner should:

- Have a strong knowledge and understanding of child development. (What can you expect a child to do?)
- Know individual children. (What interests a child? What in his life affects his learning?)
- Be knowledgeable about the cultural and social expectations of the community that the children live in. (What skills and characteristics does the community need or value?)
- Be intentional in planning and practice. (Why do you do what you do?)
- Use effective teaching approaches and practices. (What are "best" practices? What regulations and standards must be met?)
- Scaffold children's learning. (What is the learning sequence for skills and concepts? How can you build on experiences?)
- Use a variety of teaching methods. (What are the learning styles of the children? How can you present concepts for varied styles?)
- Recognize that approaches vary and will change. (What works with your current group may not work with your next group or as the group grows. How can you change or adapt activities, the environment, and teaching?)
- Be a lifelong learner. (What inspires you? What do you want to know more about?)

Applying DAP is an ongoing process and an evolving approach to teaching. Here are some ideas for continuing to learn about DAP and strategies and approaches for using DAP in your program.

DAP: Continuous learning

Learning about DAP is an ongoing process. Early learning practitioners benefit when they explore the breadth of DAP in nurturing children's overall development (social/emotional, physical, cognitive/intellectual, and cultural) and its role in guiding approaches to teaching. Embrace continuous professional development through discussions with other professionals, professional reading, and professional development opportunities. Review all parts of programs—curriculum, activities, and environments—to assess whether or not each is truly DAP. Use reflection in combination with DAP components—child development appropriateness, individual appropriateness, social/cultural appropriateness—as tools to make good decisions for each child.

From the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

- Position Statement for *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*. It is available online at www.naeyc.org/positionstatements/dap
- *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs: Serving Children from Birth through Age 8, 3rd ed.*, Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp, ed.
- *Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: An Introduction for Teachers of Children 3 to 8*, Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp.
- *Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: An Introduction for Teachers of Infants and Toddlers*, Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp with Janet Gonzalez-Mena

From Penn State Better Kid Care:

- Intentional Early Educators: Tell Me More <http://bit.ly/1TgsylJ>
- Using Reflection to Connect and Inspire Learning <http://bit.ly/1Rx9qeK>
- Reflections to Move Forward: Gaining Insights from Your Work <http://bit.ly/1TgsL8z>
- Slow Down – Try a thoughtful, reflective approach to caring for children <http://bit.ly/1SjCnKH>

Strategies and approaches for applying DAP

The five key areas of DAP in early learning are often shown as a star, with each point representing one key area: All areas are interrelated and all are important in helping children learn and develop successfully. As an early childhood professional, making decisions about each aspect is a major responsibility.

Community of learners

- Provide nurturing, loving, responsive, joyous, and safe care.
- Build consistent and caring relationships among children, families, and co-workers.
- Value and respect all members of the community.
- Celebrate and embrace diversity, reflecting children's cultures in the classroom and activities.
- Develop open communication and positive collaborations with families and colleagues to support children's learning and development.
- Focus on building self-confidence, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills.

Teaching

- Offer both child initiated and teacher-directed learning experiences.
- Be responsive to children's ideas by offering materials, documentation (samples of their work, photographs, etc), and thoughtful conversation that builds on their ideas, skills, and knowledge.
- Plan for hands on experiences where children learn by doing.
- Plan enough time for children to explore and fully engage (as well as revisit) their interests.
- Build children's learning by adding activities that challenge children and expand on what they can do.

Curriculum

- Identify and define core learning goals for individual children and the program.
- Develop a curriculum framework based on child development, individual learning, and cultures of the children in your group and that reflects learning goals.
- Use the framework for planning activities, experiences, and routines.
- Present rich content, focused work/center areas, and both indoor and outdoor environments that have meaningful connections to children's interests, curiosities, and development.
- Allow for flexibility in programming.

Assessment

- Assess what is appropriate for children developmentally, individually, and culturally.
- Use assessment tools that allow you to assess children in an authentic, ongoing, and intentional manner.
- Develop a system for collecting and compiling assessment information.
- Use results for planning, decision-making, communicating with families and other colleagues, and to identify children who may need additional learning support.
- Gather information from multiple sources, including families, children, and other teachers.

Families

- Welcome all families into the program and invite them to participate in a variety of ways.
- Work in partnership with families.
- Communicate regularly with families in an open, positive, two-way manner.
- Respect and acknowledge family goals and choices for their child.
- Involve families in planning for their children.
- Be responsive to family concerns.
- Be familiar with community programs and support families by referring them to additional services as needed.

To make effective decisions regarding practices for each area, practitioners need to be reflective and intentional. Take time to reflect on the children, your teaching, and your interactions. Think about what happened, what worked, what didn't, and any surprises. Be intentional in your planning for children, in developing policies and procedures, in designing the environment, and in your approach. Think about why you do what you do, keeping your vision and goals for children in mind. Effective decision-making will guide you in choosing the best strategies for meeting the needs of the children and families.

References: Copple, Carol and Sue Bredekamp, ed. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs: Serving Children from Birth through Age 8, 3rd Edition*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009.

Copple, Carol and Sue Bredekamp. *Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: An Introduction for Teachers of Children 3 to 8*. Washington, DC: NAEYC, 2006.

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