Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) Introduction

Overview

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is an approach to teaching grounded in the research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education. Its framework is designed to promote young children’s optimal learning and development. DAP involves teachers meeting young children where they are, both as individuals and as part of a group; and helping each child meet challenging and achievable learning goals. Developmentally appropriate practice is the foundation for all of NAEYC’s work including—publications, training programs, conferences, accreditation of child care programs, and more.

Three (3) Core Considerations of DAP

Knowing about child development and learning. Understanding what typical development and learning at different ages is a crucial starting point. This knowledge, based on research, helps us predict which experiences will support children’s learning and development. (See “12 Principles of Child Development and Learning” from Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8.)

Knowing what is individually appropriate. What we learn about specific children helps us refine decisions about how to teach and care for each child as an individual. By continually observing children’s play and interaction with the physical environment and others, we learn about each child’s interests, abilities, and developmental progress.

Knowing what is culturally important. We must make an effort to get to know the children’s families and learn about the values, expectations, and factors that shape their lives at home and in their communities. This background information helps us provide meaningful, relevant, and respectful learning experiences for each child and family.

Taken together, all three considerations result in developmentally appropriate practice.

DAP with Infants and Toddlers, Ages Birth - 3

The earliest years are all about relationships. Infants and toddlers crave and develop attachments to the special people in their lives. Depending on how parents, early childhood educators, and others treat them, babies also develop expectations about people and themselves.

- Young infants (0 to 9 months) seek **security**.
- Mobile infants (8 to 18 months) are eager to **explore**.
- Toddlers (16 to 36 months) are working on their **identity**; they want to know who they are and who’s in charge.

In child care programs, relationships with families are critical. Caring teachers and caregivers learn from the experiences, knowledge, culture, and childrearing beliefs of family members.

Partnerships grow when teachers value the family as the primary source of information about the child and as the constant in the baby’s life, and when families value the knowledge and personal characteristics of their child’s teachers. Good communication is essential.
**Working with Infants and Toddlers**

Good teachers understand typical development from birth through age 3. Knowing how the youngest children learn and develop helps professionals closely attune to individual children and their families—in all their variety.

**Here’s what DAP looks like in an infant/toddler room:**

*At mealtime, Lisa notices that Haylee is starting to grab for the spoon. The baby isn’t old enough to feed herself, but she sure is determined to try. Lisa gets Haylee her own spoon. Later in the day, she gives Haylee another spoon, and a bowl, to play with.*

Lisa selects materials for Haylee with her specific interests and developmental progress in mind. Countless small actions like this make up best practice for infants and toddlers.

The classroom example on this page is taken from *Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: An Introduction for Teachers of Infants & Toddlers*.

**DAP with Preschoolers, Ages 3-5**

Preschool children learn best when they have positive and caring relationships with adults and other children; when they receive carefully planned, intentional guidance and assistance; and when they can safely encounter and explore many interesting things in their environment.

Children enter preschool with different strengths. One child might love picture books and already know lots of letters but have trouble with social interaction. A classmate may find it easy to initiate play and share toys yet have almost no experience with books and reading.

Preschoolers thrive when they can experience new materials, roles, ideas, and activities—especially in pretend play; take great interest in feelings and become better able to express their emotions and identify those of others; make important cognitive gains that invite them to represent their world in pretend play, symbols, objects, drawings, and words; and show astonishing gains in language skills.

**Teaching Preschoolers**

Good preschool teachers maintain appropriate expectations, providing each child with the right mix of challenge, support, sensitivity, and stimulation. With their knowledge, skill, and training, teachers—in collaboration with families—can ensure that programs promote and enhance every child’s learning.

**Let’s see what DAP in preschool looks like:**

In the dramatic play center, two 4-year-old girls are pretending to read menus. Maria, noticing that neither girl has taken on the role of waiter, takes notepad and pencil in hand and asks them, “May I take your order?” Over the next few days, more children join the restaurant play. Waiters set tables, take orders, give orders to the cook, and prepare checks for diners.

Maria is an observant, inventive, and intentional teacher. Her intervention sparks fresh play, tempting children to take on different roles, enrich their social and language interactions, and use writing and math for new purposes.

The classroom example on this page is adapted from *Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices for Young Children*. 