

GROWING IDEAS

Thoughtful Teaching: Developmentally Appropriate Practice



What do I do with the three-year-old who can't sit still at circle?

How can I talk with family members about their child?

What kinds of materials and activities should I plan to promote children's growth and development?

How can I teach children about their own and others' feelings?

To answer these questions and to support the decision-making process early childhood educators use to plan their environment and teaching practices, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has created guidelines. These guidelines describe what are called Developmentally Appropriate Practice or DAP.

What is Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)?

DAP describes an approach to education that guides educators in their everyday practice. DAP comes from more than 75 years of research on child development and early learning. It gives educators information from which to make decisions based on their knowledge of child development and what is known about how young children learn.

DAP considers:

- **Age appropriateness:** what is best for most children of a particular age.
- **Individual appropriateness:** what is best for a specific child's development.
- **Cultural and social context appropriateness:** what is most relevant to and respectful of the child and the child's family, neighborhood, and community.

What are the keys to success in providing DAP?

- **Focusing on relationships.** Building a caring community of learners where all children, staff, and family members are valued and included, and where supportive relationships are developed.
- **Understanding age-related child development.** Creating a learning environment that supports children's growth and development by providing safe, healthy, interesting experiences, and encouraging exploration and discovery.
- **Knowing each individual child.** Developing curriculum that considers knowledge about each individual learner including interests, temperament, gifts, talents, needs, rate of learning, and social and cultural background.
- **Being flexible and responsive.** Routinely using assessment systems to gather information about each child to use in planning learning goals for the individual and the group.
- **Establishing partnerships with families.** Working together to support each child's development and the success of mutually agreed upon goals.



How to start using DAP to create a successful learning environment for all children:

- Review information about development and learning for the age group in your program.
- Observe and record each child's interests, level of development, learning style, and temperament.
- Use observation information when selecting learning materials and activities.
- Set up indoor and outdoor learning environments so all children can participate in activities and use the materials and space.
- Allow children enough time to fully engage in activities and complete projects.
- Create defined work areas so children can work alone, with a friend, or in a group.
- Rotate materials and activities, as needed, to meet individual and group needs.
- Incorporate culturally appropriate learning materials into each learning center.

Examples of materials and activities appropriate for young children include:

- Blocks and other construction materials.
- Books and other language arts materials.
- Water/sensory play table.
- Dramatic play.
- Art and modeling materials.
- Music and movement.

DAP also supports play activities that address development in a variety of learning domains, for example:

Literacy: As children make signs or tickets for their zoo, or read to the animals.

Math/Science: As they consider the weight, size and shape of blocks needed.

Art: As they paint and draw scenery or decorations for the cages.

Social studies: As they find out where the animals live and what they eat.

Technology: As they ask you to take a photo of their zoo and type up their stories.

Every day, early childhood educators are faced with choices. The choices educators make have a great impact on children's learning, growth, and development.

Where to learn more:

Bredenkamp, S., & Copple, C. (Eds.) (1997). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*. Rev.

ed. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

"Developmentally Appropriate Practice." (n.d.). Retrieved January 8, 2005 from <http://www.tr.wou.edu/train/cdcDAP.htm>

"Guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practices." (n.d.). Retrieved October 6, 2004 from <http://www.naeyc.org/resources/eyly/1998/05.htm>

DAP supports meaningful learning.

Children learn by doing. Providing a variety of materials that support rich and involved play experiences promotes learning in many ways. For example, when preschoolers use wooden unit blocks and animals to build a zoo, they may benefit from:

- Using their imagination and creativity to represent their theories and ideas about zoos.
- Experiencing the need to problem-solve, focus, and work for extended periods.
- Learning how to work cooperatively with others and resolve conflicts.
- Building muscle control and strength.



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