

Examining Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Centering People with the Core Competencies of DAP

by The CARE Circle

It seems straightforward. It is what we do as early childhood educators: provide learning experiences that optimize children's growth. So, what is not simple? Some aspects that present complexities include:

- The application of DAP
- Understanding its nuances
- Conversations around its use and meaning
- Current political implications

If the basic concepts of DAP are simple, why are some people against it? Are they fearful of DAP? Are they afraid of the changes associated with it? Can they insist on doing things the way they have been doing them?

For the last several months, our community of practice, the CARE circle, has been grappling with the concepts of developmentally appropriate practice. We all have something to say about DAP and what it means to us, especially in today's world. Just as each child's learning experience is dependent on their individual experience and situation, our connection to DAP, in concept and practice, varies. Where we come together is our desire to shine a light on DAP and equity. So, we ask questions of each other, and ourselves, and find the directions to go, together.

The updated statement on DAP by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020, 2022), combined with the tension that has arisen among some politicians in relation to use of this newer

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The CARE Circle grew out of the Reimagining Our Work (ROW) initiative. Our group has been meeting monthly on zoom for two years, set up by Lois Ingellis and Barbara Thornton. Additional members and contributors to this article are: Josh Thompson, Nora Krieger, Lois Harris, Trisha Dean, Tracey Findlay, Lindsey Pollock, Vonetta Rhodes and Kirsten Haugen.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice 4th Edition

The 4th edition of Developmentally Appropriate Practice was published by the National Association of Education of Young Children in two stages: The Position Statement in 2020, which was led by Barbara Willer, and the book in 2022, edited by Susan Friedman. (See Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez (2021) for an overview of the changes in the 4 editions over 4 decades).

DAP, specifically the firing of Dr. Barbara Cooper by the Governor of Alabama, were the catalysts to our discussions.

Dr. Barbara J. Cooper was appointed Secretary of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education by Governor Kay Ivey on July 1, 2020. Dr. Cooper served as Deputy State Superintendent/Chief Academic Officer, Alabama State Department of Education, Dec 2015 - Jun 2018; 2 years 7 months, Montgomery, Alabama, United States.

What grew from our initial conversations of education, care, and play-based learning evolved into messages about the educators, the caregivers, the children, and their families. Holding the child and family firmly in mind ensures they are seen in their wholeness, agency (Wilson, 2023), and the right to be the central focus of quality early childhood education.

Although we acknowledge there can be many voices, interpretations, and perspectives of DAP, we started with NAEYC's definition, statement, guidelines, and core considerations. We are grateful when our colleagues see the need for continual change, and to improve the quality of care.

Core Consideration #1: Commonality

As we take a closer look at DAP, we consider Commonality, the first of NAEYC's three core considerations, and part of the principles that serve as the evidence-base for the guidelines of DAP practice. When we explore the child development process, what research are we referencing? We follow curriculum, use our research tools, and have preached "Best Practice," but are we acknowledging human development from around the globe? Are we reimagining our practice as early childhood educators to be aware of and supportive of ALL children? Shouldn't we be expanding beyond the classical theoretical lens that has guided our thinking about children's development and learning? In determining what are the true learning and development processes for all children, let us open our scope. If we don't, DAP becomes a fixed, restrictive 'do this, NOT that' philosophy. If our focus has been mainly cognitive development, we must also embrace development of physical, linguistic, aesthetic, emotional, and social growth. If we focus on risk factors, areas for improvement, and learning loss, we have a fragmented view of student learning, a

deficit perspective, and drown out our ability to see and hear the child authentically (Chen & Krieger, 2022).

We are determined to take a more holistic perspective of learning integration, bringing together both cognitive and non-cognitive processes and outcomes, and prioritizing efforts to foster young children's socio-emotional well-being.

Core Consideration #2: Individuality

The second of NAEYC's Core Considerations is Individuality. Our conversations were not so much about whether or not teachers are acknowledging the individuality of children, but rather the process of authentic documentation that notices each child and recognizes their uniqueness. Do we understand the impact of standardized performance-based assessments on all children? Instead of authentic observation of the child with individualized plans tailored to their developmental needs, teachers are being required to administer assessments based on a "typical" rate of progress.

Quality documentation captures children's natural learning experiences and provides teachers with information to assist in ensuring each child's needs are met. We want to see teachers who are empowered and given the freedom to "go with the flow," following the lead of the child, and centering their practices on what the children need, and what they are curious about in the moment.

In other conversations, we questioned if teachers understand their role in working with families and how it relates to seeing and understanding the individual child. Many children and families are living with unprecedented levels of stress and trauma. Teachers may be unaware of a family's reality or bogged down by their own trauma. DAP requires a level of knowledge and compassion for the child's world. If we are not supporting the teacher in this responsibility, we are not adequately supporting DAP and the child's growth.

We are determined to be responsive to each child, family, and community, paying attention to cultural and communal contexts in which young children learn, are valued, and included. We work to allow teachers to be present with the children, and accept children as their authentic selves.

Core Consideration #3: Context

Last, the Core Consideration of Context. Our CARE circle includes individuals from around the globe. We have

different experiences, different perspectives, and different lives. We accept each other as we are. But do we accept that every classroom community will have its own stories and practices? In our desire for equity, are we instead settling for uniformity? Can we better practice place-based pedagogy? Can we apply “Glocalization,” the practice of conducting business according to both local and global considerations, to early childhood (Abrom, 2020)? What does it look like to build upon the foundational knowledge of child development, and adapt for the individual child care program, community, family, teacher, and child? (Bautista et al, 2020)

We are determined to understand the implications of contexts, wherever children are cared for and educated. We help set the stage so that every child and their family is welcomed, and quality care is provided. To ensure optimal development and learning, we see the whole child in the context of their world, with constant adaptation for every child.

Where Do We Go Next?

Our goal is to prepare current and prospective early childhood educators to understand and implement all components of developmentally appropriate practice and to provide equitable learning opportunities for all young children. We honor the value of early childhood educators and their right to an education that prepares them to facilitate optimum learning for all children. We will guide them, and walk alongside them, scaffold their learning and support self-reflection through a coaching approach. We believe in children and their caregivers. We continue to ask questions, and invite others to do the same. We hope to foster communication and clear, shared language on DAP.

We recognize we are not fixing things, but defining and illustrating where we are and where we want to go. We recognize more discussions are necessary to ensure quality, and inclusive care for all children. Let us not keep our own practices static, but rather keep our minds and hearts open to see the variety of ways to provide optimal care and education for young children.

Additional questions for self-reflection and conversations with your reflective partners:

- How can we implement each of the DAP guidelines in our own work?
- How can we prevent DAP from becoming checklists, or a catalyst to strive for less from students?

Additional Reading Resource List

- “Illuminating Care” by Carol Garboden Murray
 - “From Teaching to Thinking” by Ann Pelo and Margie Carter
 - “Measuring the Quality of Early Learning Environments” Trust for Learning, February 2022
 - “Don’t Look Away: Embracing Anti-Bias Classrooms” by Iheoma Irk, Stephanie Curenton, and Tonia Durden
 - “Really Seeing Children” by Deb Curtis
 - “The Girl with the Brown Crayon: How Children Use Stories to Shape Their Lives” by Vivian Gussin Paley
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- Does giving children power and agency scare us? If so, why?
 - Is DAP subjective? If so, how can we measure it?
 - What “good trouble,” as John Lewis described it, is needed to do what is best for children? (Lacayo, 2023)
 - What shared language can best describe and promote DAP?
 - How do we define quality?
 - How do we define equity?
 - Is “appropriate” (in DAP) enough, or do we want more than “appropriate” for our children?
 - Should we promote teachers, educators and caregivers as “Educarers®” to better describe their broad responsibilities and to give them agency?
 - How much trust in our Educarers® is needed to allow them to implement DAP? Do we trust them enough? How can we build more trust?
 - How can we encourage relationships between teachers, empower them as teaching teams, and support communities of practice?
 - Do families know what DAP is? How can we best support them, and help them understand what to look for, and ask for, for their children?

How can we assure we are not using a deficit approach, with children, families, and teachers?

If any of these questions intrigue you, reach out to Exchange for more collaborative discussions, or contact a member of the Care Circle as we take the next steps in providing a series delving more deeply into the topic.

In closing, Ruth Wilson's comments summed up where we landed: "Developmentally deficit approach....is not in the best interest of children ... An alternative is to focus on the uniqueness and abilities ... their strong imaginations, their resourcefulness, insights into the essence of things, their confidence, their I can do it-myself attitude" (Wilson, 2023).

References and Resources

Abrom, A. (2020). *Glocalizing: Teaching global problems through local examples*. UNA-USA. <https://unausa.org/>

Bautista, A., Bull, R., Ng, E.L., and Lee, K. (2020). That's just impossible in my kindergarten. *Advocating for 'glocal early childhood curriculum frameworks*. Policy Futures in Education. <http://10.1177/1478210320956500>.

Chen, J.J. and Krieger, N.J. (2022). Learning gain rather than learning loss during COVID-19: A proposal for reframing the narrative. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 24(1) 82–86.

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (2020). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8: A position statement*. NAEYC.

NAEYC. (2022). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8* (edited by Susan Friedman). NAEYC.

NAEYC. (2023). Background for advocates and educators supporting #DAPinECE (Updated May 8, 2023). naeyc.org/

Thompson, J. and Stanković-Ramirez. (2021). What early childhood educators know about developmentally appropriate practice. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 103(2), pp. 20-23. kappanonline.org

Wilson, R. (2023, Winter). Supporting Children's Agency Self-determination and Courage in Young Children, *Exchange*, 272 (4) pp. 8-14.

Additional Reading Links

Defending the Early Years interview Dale Ferran's ICEBERG Analogy dey.org/

RIE What Is An Educarer®? rie.org/what-is-an-educarer/

Troublemakers: Lessons in Freedom from Young Children at School by Carla Shalaby thenewpress.com/books/troublemakers

The Art of Troublemaking: A Teacher Unravels Racism/ El Arte de Crear Problema Una maestra desenmaraña el racismo by Olga Lacayo exchangepress.com/trouble/

Kaity Martin Learning Center Collaborative— Evolving Education learnercentered.org/katie-martin/

LENA - COVID-era* infants vocalize less and experience fewer conversational turns. www.lena.org/covid-infant-vocalizations-conversational-turns/

**There is controversy around using COVID-19 as an excuse for not meeting needs of children and families; another way of not recognizing diverse learning, meeting the child and family where they are, and neglecting to build relationships needed to collaborate, teach, and CARE.*

