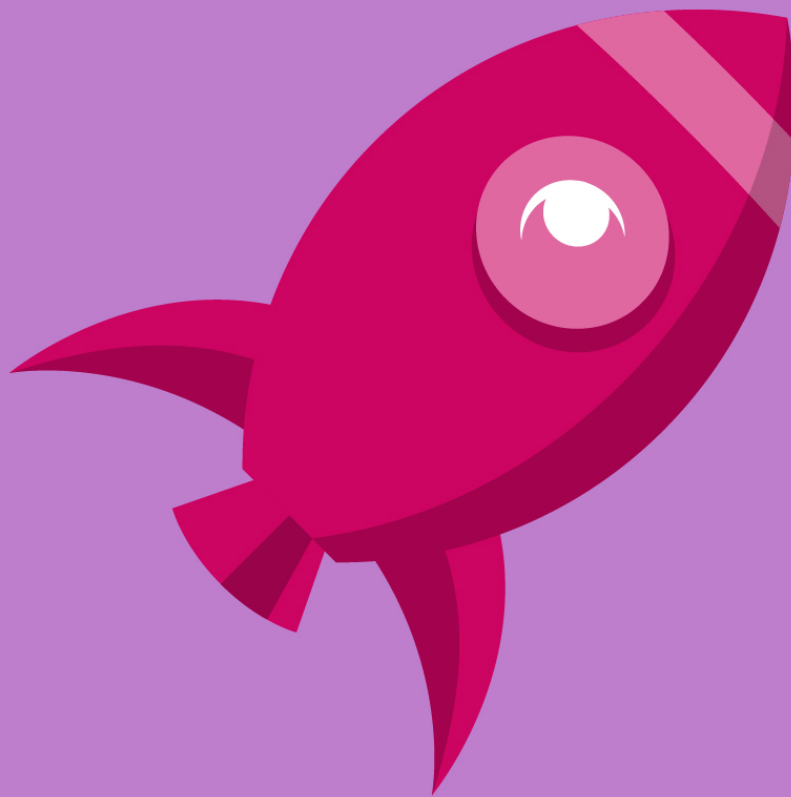


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How We Embrace Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Texas Policy

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Abstract

Four iterations of developmentally appropriate practice are outlined, with explorations into how DAP is used in Texas education policy, particularly in learner standards, curriculum, assessment, and teacher competencies. The conclusion is that DAP is ubiquitous throughout early education in Texas.

Keywords: developmentally appropriate practice, early childhood education policy, standards, curriculum

How We Embrace Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Texas Policy

Three-year old Devon tentatively climbs up and over the three-step room divider in her Montessori classroom. She joined this mixed age group of 3 to 6-year-olds earlier this year, and now, two months in, she has begun exploring other parts of the large room beyond the Practical Life area where she has spent most of her time up until now. Watching older children navigate the steps intrigues Devon; most of the five- and six-year-old kindergartners go right up and over the steps without skipping a beat, and some of the other three-year-olds just walk around. When Devon notices Maureen, wearing glasses, approach the steps cautiously, and take each one carefully, something seems to click, and Devon finds her way to try it out for herself. Well, once it's done, she now proceeds to climb up and down, down and up repeatedly, each time with a sense of curiosity, as if saying to herself "What will happen this time?" and surveying the steps after crossing them with a sigh of contentment and satisfaction. "I did it! Again!"

Many parts and pieces of this scenario play out in our Texas homes, centers, and classrooms every day. Children are exploring their space. As they get comfortable, they extend the boundaries of their territory, and try new things. Choice features strongly in their success, as does some variation of social learning – they are watching others all the time (what Vygotsky calls learning from *more competent peers* or a *more knowledgeable other* [Leong & Bodrova, 2009]). More than imitation, they are picking up habits of mind and exploring, ways of being

and doing, from watching one another. Internal drives to connect, to communicate, and to touch and feel, become tempered by external controls that guide and direct them as they construct self-regulation and motivation efforts (McRoy, Gerde, & Linscott, 2023). This irregular, though all-inclusive, path of development is called *developmental cascades* by some (Masten & Cicchetti, 2010; Oakes & Rakison, 2020; Tamis-LeMonda & Lockman, 2023).

While there are some in the field of early childhood care and education who just *get it*, having an intuitive sensibility about children, who they are and what they do, most of us grow into our deeper, fuller, richer understanding of child growth and development through study, training, experience, mentorship, and reflection (Katz, 1972; Katz & Katz, 2009). Utilizing tools such as the 2020 edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice: A Position Statement*, and the 2022 text *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*, both published by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) helps us align our development as early childhood caregivers and educators with emerging understanding from the field, and from research. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, or DAP, is a position statement (2020), and also a comprehensive text with vignettes and case studies (2022). More than a publication or statement, DAP is a framework for each of us in the early childhood care and education profession to unpack, understand, and utilize, today, and tomorrow.

The 2020 version of the DAP Position Statement is the fourth edition of this work. It promotes three core considerations (Appendix A) and nine principles (Appendix B) by which we recognize quality in early childhood education. The ways we live, and move, and have our being in the company of young children are guided by high ideals and research-driven protocols to promote optimal outcomes in the lives and well-being of our youngest Texans. These core considerations and guiding principles are not etched in stone, as if they are the only way to do good in early childcare and education. They shift and change, modify and adapt; as we know better, we then do better.

NAEYC organizes lessons learned from the field into position statements, policy initiatives, and member services. This iteration, the 4th edition of DAP, has been revised over four decades. Let's look at the history of DAP, the core considerations and guiding principles, then apply how those perspectives inform the policy and practice in Texas standards and protocols, how Texas policy has been informed by developmentally appropriate practice.

A History of DAP

In 1987, diverse forces influenced educational policy and practice across the United States (Thompson & Stanković-Ramirez, 2021). A certain attitude toward rigorous direct instruction threatened the life and joy of learning in early childhood classrooms and environments. NAEYC undertook an attempt to identify appropriate and inappropriate practices within early childhood centers and classrooms. The 1987 position statement and book by Sue Bredekamp and Carol Copple created a comparison of appropriate and inappropriate practice in an attempt to stem the tide of *push down* academics into early childhood. The first edition had just two core considerations: ages and stages, and individual variation. Over the next decade, educators discovered a major component was missing from the core considerations, the recognition that each child comes from a context, a home, a native language, and a cultural context. The second

edition (1997) included this third consideration. The beginning of the current millennium brought about opportunities to explore how to implement “Best Practice” in early learning spaces, across the board. Because NAEYC Accreditation was valued by many as the highest standard of quality in early care and education, ideas arose that DAP could also evoke “Best Practice” in all caregivers and early educators. The third edition of Developmentally Appropriate Practice, published in 2009, proclaimed the model, the ideal, that a singular “Best Practice” could be achieved by all, even those who didn’t attain NAEYC Accreditation.

The next decade brought a reexamination of quality practices in schools and classrooms, centers and homes, and clarified fallacies in the notion of “Best Practice.” Instead of looking for a singularity in practice, the next edition of DAP strengthens the view that cultural context informs quality, in different ways, in different settings. Early learning environments need to be responsive to their student population, recognizing and affirming how cultural context influences what quality looks like, and how excellence is achieved.

The current version of nine guiding principles emerged out of robust community engagement and conversation at all levels. The shift from twelve principles in the third edition down to nine in the current refocuses attention on key elements of early learning and development, as demonstrated in Devon’s story in the opener. Devon demonstrated internal developmental urges that were influenced by external forces. Her work integrated across domains and disciplines, using her faculties together to problem solve and grow. A playful spirit engaged this 3-year-old in joyful learning, who acquired their skills and competencies on her own timetable. Through this active learning experience, Devon constructed her own set of activities and engagements with the challenge before her, driven by her own motivation; nobody told her to take the steps instead of walking around. DAP is ubiquitous, it shows up all around Texas, wherever children are freely joining in learning and growing. For further background information about developmentally appropriate practice, particularly for advocates and educators supporting DAP, visit www.naeyc.org/dap. Explore the extensive collection of resources to help teachers understand and implement DAP, curated by Camille Catlett, one of many professionals who participated in the composition and editing of this fourth edition, which was led by Susan Friedman, Senior Director, Publishing & Content Development for NAEYC (Appendix C).

DAP in Texas Policy

Developmentally appropriate practice is ubiquitous. It shows up as a framework throughout early care and education, in every state in the Union, and also abroad. Public schools and private alike utilize DAP as a guiding light. Accredited centers and family day homes reference DAP in all their supporting documentation of excellence affirming accreditation. Many professionals working in non-accredited spaces depend on DAP to align their practice with what children need. Have we embraced DAP in Texas policy? If so, how? Here in the following pages are some examples of how we have identified DAP in Texas Policy. We have selected four areas to explore how DAP shows up: Learner Standards, Curriculum, Assessment, and Teacher Competencies.

I. Learner Standards

In Texas, learner standards were first codified in the 1980s for grades 1 through 12, with kindergarten standards introduced soon after (TEA, 2011). The current standards, Texas Essential Knowledge & Skills (TEKS), were introduced in the late 1990s, and have been updated or modified on a regular basis ever since. The Prekindergarten Guidelines (PKG) were also introduced in the late 1990s and modified regularly, as recently as 2022. While the TEKS are mandated by legislation for kindergarten through twelfth grade, the PKG are “guidelines,” not explicitly mandated by the Texas legislature. Throughout the PKG, responsive attention to the variability of individual development comes through, as it does similarly in DAP.

The Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines were designed to help educators identify the types of knowledge and skills that are typical of prekindergarten aged children. It is important to note that there is considerable **variability** (emphasis added) in development among children that is influenced by their individual and unique experiences. Responsive to this variability, the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines are not intended as a rationale to either accelerate or postpone instruction; instead, they define the outcomes as to which children are able to reach or move towards. (TEA, 2022, p. 3)

The Infant/Toddlers Early Learning Guidelines (ITELG) were developed by the Children’s Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Science Center-Houston in collaboration with other members of the Texas Early Learning Council. Their guidelines mirror the sentiment of DAP. Here are examples:

The Guidelines must:

- Be evidence-based
- Support differences in temperament and development
- Be sensitive to family culture and linguistic differences
- Be inclusive and address the needs of young children with special needs, disabilities, and/or developmental delays
- Link to best practices that support optimal growth in all developmental domains for young children
- Be useful to parents, the early childhood workforce, and policymakers (CLI, 2013, p. 6)

The use of DAP here in establishing the best guidelines for early childhood learner standards reflects the intention of the national guidelines for all young children. Developmentally appropriate practice is not cited in the learner standards for Texas, because the principles and considerations are “baked-in.”

II. Curriculum

The Texas Education Agency provides a list of approved curricula for Prekindergarten through 12th grade. The list is long, over 600 pages in the *Instructional Materials Current (2024-2024) Adoption Bulletin*. Many of them align with DAP, and three examples are briefly reviewed here – Creative Curriculum, by Teaching Strategies, Frog Street, and HighScope. One user of Creative

Curriculum from Keller, Texas identified how “Creative Curriculum is a rigorous framework of study that is developmentally appropriate while still meeting the needs of individual learners” (Teaching Strategies, 2024). Frog Street celebrates their collaboration with Conscious Discipline to promote their “cultural responsiveness strategies to help teachers communicate an anti-bias mindset” (Frog Street, 2024). HighScope has long been aligned with national standards of developmentally appropriate practice. In a recent statement defending DAP for everyone, they explicitly align their curriculum with DAP:

All children deserve a high-quality, research-based early education that tackles problems of racial and cultural inequity so that they can grow into successful, confident, and well-rounded adults. Both NAEYC and HighScope believe that every child, no matter their circumstances, should be given every opportunity to grow into their best selves (HighScope, 2023).

DAP is not a curriculum, but a framework. However high-quality curricula often align with DAP as a measure of success for all children.

III. Assessment

DAP does not provide specific observation tools. However, each of the three curricula mentioned above have corresponding assessment tools that align with DAP. For example, Creative Curriculum uses Teaching Strategies GOLD to assess children’s progress and track milestones. This assessment tool is on the TEA Commissioner’s List of Approved Prekindergarten Instruments for 2024-2025, along with others. Similarly, Frog Street and HighScope publish assessment tools that are also on the list of approved instruments. “Planning for Individualized Instruction (PFII) initiative to support child care programs in accessing child progress monitoring tools as part of a strategy to improve the quality of child care” (Texas Workforce Commission, 2023).

Where DAP excels is in emphasizing teacher observation as a method for knowing children, tracking growth, and planning for their learning. DAP explicitly outlines “Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children’s Development and Learning” in chapter 8 (NAEYC, 2020, 19; NAEYC, 2022, 159-180).

IV. Teacher Competencies

In the EC-Grade 3 certification standards for Texas teachers, 19% of the certification exam is focused on Child Development, and another 25% is devoted to “Learning Across the Curriculum.” This fulfills many ideas espoused by DAP. For example, Principle #7 states:

Children learn in an integrated fashion that cuts across academic disciplines or subject areas. Because the foundations of subject area knowledge are established in early childhood, educators need subject-area knowledge, an understanding of the learning progressions within each subject area, and pedagogical knowledge about teaching each subject area’s content effectively. (NAEYC, 2022, p. xxxv)

CLI Engage Core Competencies align with DAP in multiple ways. For example, the list of Texas Core Competency Areas on TECPDS (2024) website looks very similar to the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators published by NAEYC.

Conclusion

Many professionals in early care and education recognize that children develop organically; learning is their native habitat. All young Texans deserve a high-quality education that supports that natural tendency to learn, and the early childhood teaching and caring professions know how to bring quality environments to all. Both authors of this article started their work in high-quality NAEYC affiliated schools. Josh began teaching at Laurel Heights Weekday School on Woodlawn Ave in San Antonio in 1979, which soon after became one of the first NAEYC accredited schools in the country. Playful learning was valued; respect for culture and language highlighted the program as a whole; instruction came in an integrated fashion that cut across subjects or domains; and teachers were content experts sure, but even more so they were experts on knowing each child, individually. When Zlata started working with young children as a Teacher's Assistant, she was fortunate to join a NAEYC accredited center, the Dallas Jewish Community Center's early childhood education program serving children ages one to five. She was in a classroom with two other teachers and each classroom was capped at only having twelve students with at least two teachers, often three. Lead teachers were educated, experienced, and willing to train new educators. In addition, play was the central focus of the day and the curriculum. Teachers got to really know each and every child while working at this school and also, they never ran out of materials or supplies needed to work with young children. Schools like these do exist, but they are often out of reach (due to cost, or understanding quality, or lacking vision) for all young children. As these authors moved on in their careers and lives with young children and schools, they realized that educational experiences for other young Texans were sometimes polar opposite of those in their first schools.

Zlata: My mission has become to advocate for ALL young Texans to receive a high-quality education in the first five years of their lives. I believe that all children deserve high quality care and education regardless of their race, religion, SES status, etc.

Josh: My passion is to promote and protect childlike wonder and love of learning, through play.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice fits in Texas schools. We see it infused in many ways, deep in the heart of Texas, with the caring early childhood professionals throughout the state.

Note: Resources mentioned in this article are cited as examples of high-quality materials as found in the TEA list of High-quality instructional materials. The authors neither endorse these materials nor disrespect other materials not mentioned in the article.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Core Considerations of Developmentally Appropriate Practice to Inform Decision Making
(NAEYC, 2020, pp. 6-7)

Commonality—current research and understandings of processes of child development and learning that apply to all children, including the understanding that all development and learning occur within specific social, cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts

Individuality—the characteristics and experiences unique to each child, within the context of their family and community, that have implications for how best to support their development and learning

Context—everything discernible about the social and cultural contexts for each child, each educator, and the program as a whole

Appendix B

Principles of Child Development and Learning (NAEYC, 2020, pp. 8-13)

1. Development and learning are dynamic processes that reflect the complex interplay between a child's biological characteristics and the environment, each shaping the other as well as future patterns of growth.
2. All domains of child development—physical development, cognitive development, social and emotional development, and linguistic development (including bilingual or multilingual development), as well as approaches to learning—are important; each domain both supports and is supported by the others.
3. Play promotes joyful learning that fosters self-regulation, language, cognitive and social competencies as well as content knowledge across disciplines. Play is essential for all children, birth through age 8.
4. Although general progressions of development and learning can be identified, variations due to cultural contexts, experiences, and individual differences must also be considered.
5. Children are active learners from birth, constantly taking in and organizing information to create meaning through their relationships, their interactions with their environment, and their overall experiences.
6. Children's motivation to learn is increased when their learning environment fosters their sense of belonging, purpose, and agency. Curricula and teaching methods build on each child's assets by connecting their experiences in the school or learning environment to their home and community settings.
7. Children learn in an integrated fashion that cuts across academic disciplines or subject areas. Because the foundations of subject area knowledge are established in early childhood, educators need subject-area knowledge, an understanding of the learning progressions within each subject area, and pedagogical knowledge about teaching each subject area's content effectively.
8. Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery and when they have many opportunities to reflect on and practice newly acquired skills.
9. Used responsibly and intentionally, technology and interactive media can be valuable tools for supporting children's development and learning.

Appendix C

An Overview of DAP Resources, collated by Camille Catlett

An Overview of DAP Resources: <https://www.youtube.com/embed/bKVRtLUFxRk>

NAEYC has faculty resources to accompany the fourth edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*. These resources are tools that can be used to facilitate higher education students' deeper understanding of the DAP position statement and book.

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/developmentally-appropriate-practice/get-faculty-resources>

List of Faculty Resources

http://faculty.tamuc.edu/jthompson/dap/dap_list_of_faculty_resources_0.pdf

DAP: Early Childhood Educator and General Resources

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/developmentally-appropriate-practice/ece-resources>

Casebook: DAP = Case studies provide real-world examples of DAP in practice.

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/books/dap-casebook>

Appendix D

Texas Education Agency (TEA) Resources

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