

What early childhood educators know about developmentally appropriate practice - kappanonline.org

Josh Thompson, Ph.D. & Zlata Stanković-Ramirez, Ph.D.

15-20 minutes



Getty Images

Teaching young children requires an understanding of the interactions among typical patterns of child development, children's individual characteristics, and their social and cultural contexts.

In the 1980s, at a time when education policy makers appeared to

be intent on “pushing down” the elementary grades curriculum into the preK years, particularly with a focus on math, reading, and other academic content and skills, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) — the largest professional organization in the field of early education — set out to articulate its distinct mission and principles. Building on decades of research and practice in early care and education, the resulting position statement, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP)*, provided much-needed guidance to professionals working with children up to eight years in age (NAEYC, 1987). Teachers of young children, the document argued, must approach their work with compassion, curiosity (Thompson, Geneser, & Walker, in press), and careful attention to two core considerations: young children’s most typical ages and stages of development (their commonalities) and each child’s unique developmental needs (their individuality).

At the time, many leaders in the field were concerned about the widespread use of harmful teaching practices in early care and education. Thus, the document included charts and tables describing and distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate classroom strategies. However, critics argued that this defined developmentally appropriate practice in terms of what it is *not*, dwelling too much on the things educators shouldn’t do. Thus, the second edition of the framework, published in 1997, emphasized the positive. Drawing on new insights from research on the brain and early learning, it recommended ways to meet children’s most common developmental needs, as well as ways to identify and respond to their individual differences. Further, the 1997 edition added a third core consideration, cultural context, calling upon educators to recognize children’s diversity and to

value the cultural and linguistic resources they bring with them from home.

The third edition of *DAP*, published in 2009, continued along much the same lines as the 1997 edition, focusing on teaching practices that meet children’s typical developmental needs, while also being responsive to their individual needs and their cultural differences. Further, the third edition emphasized “best practice” as a tool for assessing normative instructional practices. Where the second edition (1997) added the third core consideration — “using knowledge of the social and cultural context to inform practice” (p. 41) — the third edition deemphasized these contexts to lean in toward “best practice” for all children.

Teachers are expected to “follow the child” and use robust observation and documentation to understand where a child is coming from.

A new understanding

And now we come to the fourth and most recent iteration of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, published in 2020, which offers a significantly updated vision of high-quality early childhood care and education. What’s new in this latest position statement, and how does it revise and expand upon the field’s previous understandings of how children develop and what they need from their teachers and other caretakers?

For one thing, and informed by recent research, the new edition of *DAP* rejects the long-standing assumption that child development proceeds through an orderly and linear process. For instance, Piaget’s well-known and hugely influential theory of cognitive

development described young children as passing through four distinct age-related stages of growth (Piaget, 1971). Likewise, behaviorist researchers have often asserted that children move ahead through a series of sequential steps, continuously developing by learning a little at a time and adding a bit more to what they already know. In contrast, the new *DAP* adopts the metaphor of *waves and cycles* (Bredekamp & Willer, 2021), reflecting the field's recognition that development is a much less straightforward process than previously thought, and it includes not just cognitive development but also physical, linguistic, aesthetic, emotional, and social growth. Instead of being separated by rigid developmental boundaries, children's developmental cycles tend to overlap with each other, moving quickly in some areas and slowly in others, or leaping ahead on one day and regressing the next (NAEYC, 2020, p. 10; Siegler, 1996). In short, educators should understand that children develop in complex and differing ways — always within a local ecology of nurture and care, influenced by a growing circle of contacts (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) — and it's a mistake to try to fit children into a preexisting template, insisting that every child should achieve specific milestones at specific ages.

Thus, the new *DAP* calls upon educators to pay even closer attention to the particular cultural and community contexts in which young children learn, noting that “[T]o be developmentally appropriate, practices must also be culturally, linguistically, and ability appropriate for each child” (NAEYC, 2020, p. 5). The earlier versions of *DAP* neglected to give enough emphasis to this point, acknowledge the authors. When writing the 1987 version, especially, they were so focused on preventing elementary-level

educators from pushing the primary school curriculum down to the preschool level (and forcing inappropriate practices upon young children) that they neglected other important elements of a solid early childhood program, having to do with children's diverse abilities and cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Bredekamp & Willer, 2021).

Three core considerations of developmentally appropriate practice

1. *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.
2. *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.
3. *Context*. Everything discernible about the social and cultural contexts for each child, each educator, and the program as a whole.

Source: National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). *Developmentally appropriate practice*. pp. 6-8. More complete explanations of the considerations are available at www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/core-considerations.

Core principles and beliefs

What does this more complete picture mean for early childhood education? First, it's important to acknowledge that typically developing children tend to experience *some* emergent developmental moments that are universal, shared across culture, gender, and context, and early childhood educators should understand and recognize these familiar developmental patterns. Children typically crawl before they walk. Toddlers understand many more words and spoken communication than they are able to articulate. Secure attachment with primary caregivers affords children the opportunity to seek out nurturing reciprocal relationships with new caregivers and peers.

On the other hand, educators should also understand that each child's development occurs in their own individual social, cultural, and linguistic context. Parents truly are children's first teachers, and each child, family, and community is unique. As early childhood educators support children in all aspects of their development, they must get to know each family and each child and recognize that every aspect of social and cultural development matters, as does the social and cultural context of the educational program itself.

In general, teachers are expected to "follow the child" and use robust observation and documentation to understand where a child is coming from. Integrating knowledge of "typical" development together with the social and cultural context affords the observant teacher with data with which to engage each child, right where they are. While deep understanding of typical behavior allows for early detection and assessment of learning differences, culturally situated behaviors do not warrant intervention. The teacher informed by *DAP* adapts expectations from focusing on what's

normative to what's expected of *this* child, from *their* culture, in *this* environment.

The latest version of *DAP* (NAEYC, 2020, pp. 9-13) also includes nine principles (pared down from 12 principles listed in the 2009 version) that describe the conditions in which young children learn best. They emphasize that child development involves an interplay between children's biological characteristics and their environment (i.e., nature and nurture); that it's normal for children to vary in terms of how (and how quickly) they develop; that children learn best when their environment both challenges them and gives them a sense of belonging, and that children learn best through meaningful relationships in culturally sensitive classrooms. The new principles also highlight the special importance of play as a means of learning, and they urge early childhood educators to create opportunities for active, joyful play, both in school and out (Hirsh-Pasek, 2021). Finally, another new principle (perhaps the most debatable of the nine, given experts' conflicting views on how much and what kinds of technology are appropriate for young children) holds that technology, when used intentionally and responsibly, can also be a valuable tool that supports development and learning.

Nine principles of developmentally appropriate practice

1. Development processes reflect an interplay between biology and environment.
2. Domains of development both support and are supported by the others.
3. Play promotes joyful learning.

4. Variations due to cultural contexts, experiences, and individual differences matter.
5. Children are active learners.
6. Children's motivation to learn is increased when their learning environment fosters their sense of belonging, purpose, and agency.
7. Children learn in an integrated fashion that cuts across academic disciplines or subject areas.
8. Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery.
9. Technology and interactive media can be valuable tools for supporting children's development and learning.

Source: National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). *Developmentally appropriate practice*, pp. 9-13. A more complete description of the principles is available at www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/principles

Diversity, equity, and the individual child

The new version of DAP is informed also by the NAEYC's recently adopted position statement, *Addressing Equity in Early Childhood Education* (2019), which expands on the organization's emphasis on diversity and inclusion to address the rights of all children to "equitable learning opportunities that help them achieve their full potential as engaged learners and valued members of society" (p. 1). According to the statement, early childhood educators must understand the ways in which the racism entrenched in American culture and propagated through our education system spoils the

innocence of childhood (Sturdivant, 2021, Sturdivant & Alanís, 2020). For instance, researchers have found that young Black boys are sent to detention and expelled in disproportionate numbers (Smith & Harper, 2015), that many teachers hold biased views of which children will be disruptive (Gilliam et al., 2016), and many teachers hold misconceptions about the role of fathers in Black children's lives (Wilson & Thompson, 2020).

At the heart of developmentally appropriate practice is the child — this unique and curious and joyous scientist, investigator, and knowledge seeker.

Early childhood educators who use developmentally appropriate practice do their best to challenge their own biased assumptions and to form a more healthy and holistic view of each child in their care. This vision focuses not on deficits, or on measuring individuals against standardized norms, but presumes that children have varied gifts, each of which contributes to the betterment of the whole classroom community.

Attending to the waves of development within the process of typical child development empowers educators of children of all ages to go with the flow and center their practice on what the children in their care need in the moment. This means that every classroom community will have its own stories and practices, created to welcome and adapt to every child. But, within these variations, each classroom shares the goal of seeing every child as uniquely gifted to learn, grow, and thrive.

At the heart of developmentally appropriate practice is the child — this unique and curious and joyous scientist, investigator, and knowledge seeker. Creating a child-first view of education shifts

emphasis away from teaching and instead focuses on giving young children opportunities to take an active role in their own learning (Montessori, 1949), both with and without explicit instruction. All young children are ready to learn, and developmentally appropriate practice allows early childhood educators to create spaces where that learning flows in a positive, nurturing direction.

References

Bredenkamp, S. & Willer, B. (2021, June 9). *Intentional decision making: The core considerations*. [Symposium session]. NAEYC DAP Symposium. Washington, DC.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (Ed.). (2005). *Making human beings human*. Sage.

Gilliam, W.S., Maupin, A N., Reyes, C.R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016). *Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions? A research study brief*. Yale University Child Study Center.

Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2021, June 10). *Re-imagining education: Delivering high-quality education through playful learning*. [Symposium session]. NAEYC DAP Symposium. Washington, DC.

Montessori, M. (1949). *The absorbent mind*. Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2019). *Advancing equity in early childhood education*. Author.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1987). *Developmentally appropriate practice* (1st ed.). Author.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practice* (2nd ed). Author.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2009). *Developmentally appropriate practice* (3rd ed.). Author.

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (2020). *Developmentally appropriate practice*. Author.

Piaget, J. (1971). *Biology and knowledge*. University of Chicago Press.

Siegler, R.S. (1996). *Emerging minds: The process of change in children's thinking*. Oxford University Press.

Smith, E.J. & Harper, S.R. (2015). *Disproportionate impact of K-12 school suspension and expulsion on Black students in southern states*. Pennsylvania University, Center for the Study of Race in Education.

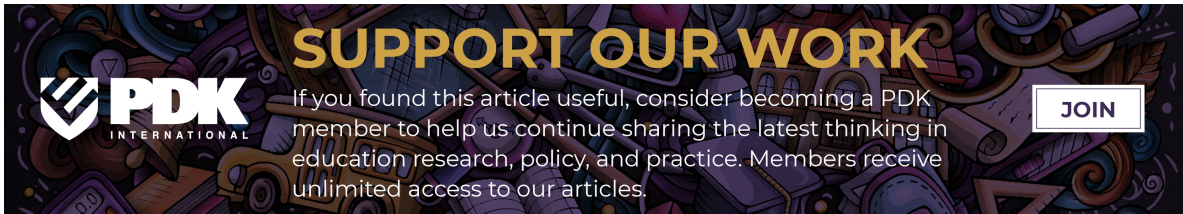
Sturdivant, T.D. (2021). Racial awareness and the politics in play: Preschoolers and racially diverse dolls in a US classroom. *International Journal of Early Childhood*.

Sturdivant, T.D. & Alanís, I. (2020). I'm gonna cook my baby in a pot: Young Black girls' racial preferences and play behaviors. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 49, 473-482.

Thompson, J., Geneser, V., & Walker, K. (in press). *Why I teach: A content analysis of eight early childhood teacher vignettes*.

Wilson, L.L. & Thompson, J. (2020). Critical race theory and African American fatherhood: Countering the mainstream narrative. *Journal of African American Males in Education*, 12 (1), pp. 89-106.

This article appears in the October 2021 issue of *Kappan*, Vol, 103, No. 2.



-

- [Zlata Stanković-Ramirez](#)

JOSH THOMPSON (Josh.Thompson@tamuc.edu; @billyjoshtex) is a professor of early childhood education at Texas A&M University-Commerce.

ZLATA STANKOVIĆ-RAMIREZ (ZRamirez@coastal.edu; @stanovic_zlata) is an assistant professor of early childhood education at Coastal Carolina University, Conway, SC.