3 Understanding and Applying Developmentally Appropriate Practice
Thinking Ahead

1. What is developmentally appropriate practice?
2. What does it mean to be an intentional teacher?
3. How do teachers make decisions about what is developmentally appropriate for young children?
4. What five tasks make up the role of the early childhood teacher?
5. What does it mean to “widen the lens” when considering issues of practice? Why is this a useful way of thinking?
6. What does research say about developmentally appropriate practice?

Today is Olivia’s first day of preschool in her Head Start program at the local elementary school that her older brothers also attend. They have been teasing her about how hard school is and she is a little fearful as well as excited. She hesitantly enters the building clutching the postcard her teacher sent her to welcome her to school. Aware that several of the newly enrolled children and their families speak Spanish at home, Olivia’s teacher, Mr. Washington, has arranged for a translator to be present this morning. He has also learned a few key phrases in Spanish himself, including how to say, “I’m sorry, I don’t speak Spanish, but Ms. Lopez is here to help.”

When Olivia’s grandmother arrives at the classroom door, Mr. Washington greets her in Spanish and pulls the translator into the conversation. Olivia’s brothers and mother speak English but her grandmother only speaks Spanish. Then Mr. Washington stoops down to Olivia’s eye level and greets her warmly with a smile, “I’m so happy that you are here, Olivia. We’re going to have lots of fun playing, listening to stories, and making friends.” Mr. Washington offers his hand to Olivia and escorts her to a cubby with her name on it where she can store her belongings. “We’re going to have some quiet play time while the children are arriving and then we’ll eat breakfast
Part 1 The Early Childhood Education Profession: Foundations

To her grandmother says that you like to do puzzles so I’ll show you where we keep them,” Mr. Washington says. Olivia feels good already because her teacher is so nice and she likes the chairs and tables that are just her size. The puzzles are ones that she can put together all by herself, too. Olivia is already feeling comfortable at school on her first day, because her teacher understands and engages in developmentally appropriate practice.

Throughout this book and throughout your studies and work as an early childhood educator, you will hear the term developmentally appropriate practice. In this chapter we discuss the evolution of this concept and examine how it is used in the classroom. We also discuss the concept of becoming an intentional teacher. Next, we address the question of how to decide what is developmentally appropriate and the multifaceted role of the early childhood teacher. We also introduce the idea of “widening the lens” as a metaphor for thinking in less polarized ways about best practice.

The concepts addressed in this chapter are part of the foundational knowledge of early childhood education. These topics provide a basic framework for organizing much of your beginning knowledge. A large body of literature exists about child development and its application to early childhood practice (see Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Gestwicki, 2006; Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren, 2006; Spodek & Saracho, 2006). This chapter considers some of this literature, as well as the definition, principles, and guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice as described by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2009a).

Defining Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Over time, the phrase developmentally appropriate practice has been defined and used in different ways. Its definition has evolved as new research and knowledge have become available.

What Is Developmentally Appropriate Practice?

Developmentally appropriate practice is teaching that is attuned to children’s ages, experience, abilities, and interests, and that helps them attain challenging and achievable goals. The foundations of developmentally appropriate practice, as it is defined today, lie in the history of early childhood education. Most fundamental is the premise that teaching young children should be based on what is known about how they develop and learn optimally.

Within the field of developmental psychology, the concept of developmentally appropriate has been widely used for more than a century and refers to age-related and individual human variation. Early childhood educators have long used the phrase developmentally appropriate to describe materials, learning experiences, or expectations of children of varying ages. For example, during the late 1970s, the federal government charged the Head Start program with helping children acquire basic educational skills. Most early childhood educators agreed that this goal was acceptable if, and only if, the program was implemented in a “developmentally appropriate way” (J. Klein, personal communication, 1980).

The NAEYC Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice

The concept of developmentally appropriate practice gained widespread recognition and influence in the mid-1980s when NAEYC published position statements on developmen-
Chapter 3  Understanding and Applying Developmentally Appropriate Practice

tally appropriate practice (Bredekamp, 1987). A position statement is a document that articulates a stance, usually research based, that an organization is taking in response to an issue or a problem. Based on new research, the experience of practitioners, and the changing contexts in which early childhood education occurs, NAEYC revised its statement on developmentally appropriate practice in the mid-1990s (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), and again in 2009 (NAEYC, 2009a).

NAEYC’s current position statement (2009a) describes principles and guidelines for teaching young children from birth through age 8. NAEYC also presents recommended practices for different age groups: infants and toddlers, preschoolers, kindergartners, and children in the primary grades (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The position statement is widely used as a summary of the field’s best thinking, a defense of its valued practices, and an advocacy tool for improving programs for young children.

Each revision of the statement is in response to particular trends occurring at the time. In 1986–1987, NAEYC sought to clarify the term to help professionals consistently interpret its standards for early childhood program accreditation. A second motivation at that time was to counter the trend toward “push-down” curriculum in schools, in which content that was previously taught in first grade was being taught in kindergarten or even preschool (Shepard & Smith, 1988). This shift in curriculum expectations led to increasing numbers of children struggling or failing in their earliest school experiences or being judged not ready for kindergarten.

The appropriateness of expectations for children, as well as curriculum and teaching practices, continues to be an issue addressed in each subsequent revision of NAEYC’s statement. In addition, the 1997 revision brought more attention to the critical role of culture and language in development, the inclusion of children with disabilities, and the teacher’s role as intentional decision maker (Bredekamp, 1997a). The 2009 statement continues these emphases and also responds to current issues such as addressing the achievement gap and alignment from pre-K to grade 3.

Over the years, the position statement has generated controversy including questions about whether the recommended practices apply equally well to diverse groups of children (e.g., Hyun, 1998; Mallory & New, 1994; New, 2007). In turn, new research and critiques in the literature and in professional forums continue to stimulate productive discussions among early childhood educators about what is best for young children.

**Developmentally Appropriate Practice in the Classroom**

Developmentally appropriate practice begins with early childhood educators’ knowledge of how children learn and develop. Its ultimate goal is to promote the development and enhance the learning of each individual child served. “Developmentally appropriate practice” is used by some as a short-hand term for the value of play or letting children be children, not pushing them to grow up too soon. In fact, these views of developmentally appropriate practice are only partial truths. Developmentally appropriate practice (sometimes abbreviated as D.A.P.) is a term that is used within the early childhood profession to describe the complex work of the early childhood teacher.

Knowing how children learn and develop is essential for teachers of young children. The more they know and tune in to the way children think and learn, the more effective their teaching and the more satisfying their work. To successfully engage in developmentally appropriate practice (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006), teachers need to:

- Meet children where they are, as individuals and as a group.
- Help each child attain challenging and achievable goals that contribute to his or her ongoing development and learning.

**Meeting Children Where They Are**

Knowing what children are generally capable of and how they learn, within a given age range, provides teachers with a starting point for planning and organizing a program. But...
such a broad picture is not enough to achieve developmentally appropriate practice. Teachers must go beyond what is "typical"; they must recognize that they will have little success if they try to teach everyone the same way. They must also recognize that if their expectations are too high, children become frustrated; if their expectations are too low, their students will become bored. In either case—teaching only what is "typical" or having unrealistic expectations—children will fail to make learning progress.

Good teachers continually observe children’s engagement with materials, activities, and people in order to learn about each child’s abilities, interests, and needs. Based on this information, they plan curriculum and adapt their teaching strategies to help children make continued progress. Meeting children where they are might look something like this:

Nathan only knows a few letters, he does not sit still during story time, and he is significantly behind on many of the kindergarten literacy goals. His teacher knows, however, that all kinds of transportation vehicles fascinate him. On a class visit to the library, she helps Nathan locate several information books on transportation to read with him and have him take home. He especially likes one book about all kinds of trucks. To interest Nathan in learning letters and words, his teacher prints the names of the different trucks on cards for him to match with the pictures. Soon, Nathan is drawing pictures of the trucks and trying to write the words himself.

Four-year-old Jamal speaks Arabic at home and is learning English at school. His teacher often reads to him in a small group, with other children whose home language is not English, using books with limited vocabulary and clear correspondence between the pictures and words. She also uses other cues to aid his understanding. For instance, she uses real objects as props when she introduces new words such as the kinds of food that the Very Hungry Caterpillar (Carle, 1969) is eating. She stays in close contact with his parents, communicating through a translator, to learn about the competencies he demonstrates at home, and she encourages the family to talk and read with him in their own language.

These examples demonstrate how teachers meet children where they are by assessing what they already know as well as learning about their interests. At the same time, teachers keep in mind the teaching goals.

**Helping Children Reach Challenging and Achievable Goals**

Meeting learners where they are is important, but it is just the beginning. As illustrated in the preceding examples, learning is most effective when materials or experiences not only build on what children already know and on what they can do, but also require them to stretch toward new skills and understandings.

Developmentally appropriate goals for a given group of children need to be realistic and attainable for most children within the age range of the group. This means they must be challenging but not so difficult that children fail to understand. Further, children need to have plenty of opportunities to practice their newly achieved skills to the point of mastery. Young children usually initiate such practice on their own, such as when they repeatedly count the steps they climb or try time and again to balance on one foot.

Once new skills have been mastered, children need new challenges to continue to learn. These new challenges should provide children with a reasonable stretch that is “just
achievable.” For example, consider a group of kindergartners learning to play catch. If the teacher consistently throws the ball way over children’s heads, they will soon give up in frustration. But if she makes the task too easy—perhaps rolling the ball on the ground—most 5-year-olds would quickly grow bored and call it “baby stuff.” Instead, a teacher who is taking into account what is developmentally appropriate will provide just the right amount of challenge for each child. One child will need the ball thrown right into her extended arms, while another who has had more practice will joyfully leap to catch it over her head.

Teaching in a developmentally appropriate way brings together meeting the learner where he or she is and helping children achieve goals. Teachers keep the curriculum’s learning goals in mind as they determine where children are and the next steps forward. What is challenging and achievable varies from one child to the next, depending on each child’s level of development; prior experiences, knowledge, and skills; and the context within which the learning takes place.

To be developmentally appropriate, teaching practices must be effective—they must contribute to children’s ongoing development and learning. That is, if children are not learning and progressing toward important outcomes, then the practices and experiences in the program are not developmentally appropriate. To ensure their practices are in fact effective and developmentally appropriate, teachers need to be intentional in everything they do.

### Engaging in Intentional Teaching

To be effective in their work, teachers cannot leave important aspects of children’s development and learning to chance. In everything early childhood teachers do—from organizing the environment to planning the curriculum to choosing specific teaching strategies or adapting their plans for individual children—effective teachers are intentional teachers. Intentional teachers have a purpose for their actions; they make decisions for a reason. The intentional teacher plans carefully in advance, but also has enough knowledge to make thoughtful decisions throughout the day, even during the unplanned, spontaneous, “teachable moments” that inevitably arise.

### Making Purposeful Decisions

Intentional teaching and developmentally appropriate practice go hand in hand. Sometimes in early childhood classrooms where children spend significant periods of time in exploration, play, and activities they choose and pursue independently, uninformed observers may think that the situation is “anything goes.” However, if the child is in a program that truly is developmentally appropriate, teachers’ intentionality undergirds the entire program and all of the experiences provided. The teacher carefully organizes the environment and selects and arranges the materials to promote children’s active engagement, both mental and physical.

In planning the learning experiences, the intentional teacher thinks carefully about what will foster children’s enthusiasm for learning and enable them to reach important goals in all areas of their development and learning. She regularly observes and assesses children and then uses the information gleaned...
Part 1 The Early Childhood Education Profession: Foundations

to gauge her interactions with the children, both individually and in small groups, to promote ongoing learning and enable children to master new challenges.

Understanding and Explaining Decisions

Intentional teachers are able to explain the rationale for their decisions to administrators, other teachers, and family members. Intentional teachers are also alert to the need to modify plans, recognizing that there will be times when what they have planned doesn’t work out. Perhaps the children will master a skill sooner than expected and lose interest in the activity; or, conversely, a task may be beyond the children's current abilities and they become confused or discouraged. In either case, an intentional teacher will have planned for such possibilities and be prepared to modify the learning experience or shift to another strategy that will be more effective in achieving the goal. Consider the following examples of practices, which are generally thought to be developmentally appropriate in light of the additional criteria of intentionality and effectiveness:

Tiana Carstairs teaches 4-year-olds in a Head Start program. Each day she reads a different Big Book (an oversize picture book with limited text per page) to the class. The children enjoy the readings and respond readily to Tiana’s questions about the letters in print or sounds they hear. She also points out concepts of print by tracking the words on the page left to right and noting how to turn the pages. An observer in Tiana’s class would undoubtedly view her practice as developmentally appropriate. What the casual observer would miss, however, is that 14 of the 16 children have mastered the concepts of print that Tiana continues to teach. In addition, 8 children already know all the letters.

Rather than using this same teaching strategy every day without reflection, Tiana should regularly assess children’s learning so that she continually adds challenge as children achieve new goals. Although the children enjoy the Big Book readings, the limited vocabulary contained in the books is not helping them learn new words. Tiana needs to be more intentional about building vocabulary in this group of children who are already significantly behind in language development. She needs to employ effective practices such as reading more complex stories and information books in small groups and engaging children in conversations about the readings.

Jana Baker teaches in a full-day kindergarten. She believes strongly in the value of play for children’s learning and development, and she has been able to preserve time and materials for play in her classroom. In the early days of Jana’s career when parents or principals questioned her, she defended play by simply stating that it is developmentally appropriate. But as pressures increased for literacy instruction in kindergarten, Jana found herself thinking more critically about her practice. She observed that during choice time, children’s play had become repetitive. Boys built the same roads and towers in the block area. Few children engaged in dramatic play and those who did pretended to be characters they had seen on TV or in video games. Other children wandered from one activity to another without engagement or sustained interest.

Jana realized that she didn’t know enough about play; she couldn’t explain clearly why it was valuable for children and didn’t know how to enhance children’s involvement. After attending workshops and reading professional journals, Jana became aware that there were many missed opportunities for learning in her classroom. She learned ways to help children engage in mature, sustained, sociodramatic play that builds social and emotional skills and language. She introduced board games to help children learn about numbers while cooperating and having fun.

Jana began to see that choice time provided many opportunities for her to engage in one-on-one, extended conversations with children or to build writing, reading, and
math into their play. In short, Jana became intentional in her interactions with children during play and in the kind of play experiences she provided. As a result, play became a more effective teaching and learning experience for the children in her kindergarten.

As we can see in the previous scenarios, intentional teachers continually reflect on their own decisions and gather evidence of how well children are doing. They may discuss their practices with colleagues and children's families. They modify their practices when these are not benefiting children. Read the feature titled *Becoming an Intentional Teacher: What Did You Do Today?* for an example of a teacher's actions and the thinking behind them.

Intentional teaching requires constant decision making. Next we describe what teachers need to consider when making good decisions.

### Deciding What Is Developmentally Appropriate

Teachers of young children make hundreds of decisions every day: which book to read to what size group, which questions to ask when, how to intervene with a child who is struggling to enter a play situation, and so forth. They must be able to negotiate difficult situations, such as what to do when a child shares a confidential family secret, how much support to give two boys who are trying to fairly divide the blocks, and what intervention to try with a first grader who is significantly behind in reading development. The list goes on and on. Day after day and hour after hour, teachers are called on to determine what is developmentally appropriate.

In many cases, decisions are the result of careful advance consideration and planning. For example, teachers must consider what kinds of learning experiences will be provided to help the group achieve which important learning goals. These decisions include planning curriculum so that the learning goals established for the group are achievable and challenging for the children. For instance, although the school district prekindergarten curriculum calls for teaching the alphabet, Ms. Jonas determines which children in her class have not yet achieved this goal and which children have already mastered the alphabet. The curriculum plan as written may be appropriate for many children in the former group, but the latter group connect letters and sounds, and use recognizable letters in their own writing.

Other decisions teachers make include setting up the physical environment, which materials to place where, how to schedule the day, or how to group children for various learning experiences. Ms. Jonas ensures that the alphabet is displayed at children's eye level as a model for children's writing, and magnetic letters and alphabet puzzles are available for children to manipulate in their work and play. She organizes the daily schedule to ensure that children have ample time to write on their own and, during the day, she works in small groups with children who need extra help learning letters.

Some situations require teachers to make immediate decisions. For instance, suppose a dump truck pulls up outside the preschool window. The teacher may decide to interrupt his prior plans and follow the children's interest by taking them outside to observe the truck unloading the gravel for a new driveway next door. Or he may see that most of the children are engrossed in learning centers and decide not to interrupt. Likewise, if the story a teacher is reading to a group doesn't seem to hold the children's interest, she can readily switch gears and select another book or engage children in an active song.

Primary grade teachers must make numerous short- and long-term decisions as they support children's learning, particularly each child's reading progress. Some teaching decisions have lasting consequences for individual children. For example, identifying a child for special education services or determining a plan to work with a child who is extremely aggressive and disruptive has far-reaching consequences. When making such a decision, the teacher needs to take into consideration many sources of information, observations over time, and the diverse perspectives of family members and also other professionals such as special educators or social workers.
What Did You Do Today?

Here’s What Happened  After the 45-minute learning center time in my preschool classroom, I asked each child to tell what he or she had done. A few children just pointed to where they had gone or ran back over there to show me. I thought of these children as the “Pointers.” A few others verbally identified the center they had played in, saying something like “I was in the block area” or just “Blocks,” but added nothing about what they were doing there. I’ll call them the “Namers.” Other children said more about what they had done and sometimes the other children they played with, though their descriptions were often unclear to anyone who hadn’t been there (“I tried and tried to get it to stay, but it fell”). This group I’ll call the “Detailers.” There were variations within these levels, but basically the children fell into these three groups.

After doing this reflection exercise for a few days to be sure I had a good idea of each child’s level of responding, I began asking children to reflect in small groups and added some more challenge to help each child move to the next level. For example, in working with children who were Pointers I had a photo of each center, and I would ask the child to find the center where they had worked. Then I said, “Oh, you worked in the art center, right?” or “Ah, you were building in the block area.” I repeated the name of the center several times.

With the Namers, I asked them to tell me what they did in the center they identified. Sometimes I asked a question such as “What were you building today?” and if I got no response, I added “Were you building a road, or something else?” I would also say things like “Hmm, let’s see, what was I doing? I spent some time watching children in each of the centers, and I took my sick puppy to the veterinarian’s office that Mark and Bobbie were running.”

With the Detailers, I used a variety of methods. Sometimes I paired two children who responded at similar levels and had them tell each other what they had done in centers that day. Because a child often couldn’t follow all of her partner’s account, they would ask each other questions like “What fell? What were you trying to build?”

Here’s What I Was Thinking I decided to start this routine—asking the children what they had done in the centers—for two main reasons. First, it helps develop their ability and tendency to reflect, to think about the past—in this case the recent past—rather than the present. At their age, children are increasing in their capacity to think back (or forward to the future) if they have experiences that encourage them to do it. They’re very interested in their own activities, so they are more motivated than they might otherwise be. This is also a good way to extend their oral language and communication skills.

I started wherever each individual child was and tried to help each one go a little farther, including the ones who were already saying a lot. They can and should move forward too. Sometimes I tried using a visual support like the photos of the centers to see if that would help stimulate a little more language. I also modeled both the language, for instance, by repeating the center names, and the practice of thinking back and reflecting on what one has done.

Having pairs of children tell each other things is a useful approach because children want their peers to understand them and will try hard to get their message across. I also model talking and asking questions to get clarification, and the children pick it up and do it themselves. Gradually the more verbal children who at first give a lot of disjointed details get better at giving a coherent account of their activities.
Making Informed Decisions

Large or small, all decisions that teachers make should be informed decisions. NAEYC (2009a) identifies three fundamental considerations that guide teachers in making decisions about what is developmentally appropriate for children:

1. **Consider what is known about development and learning of children within a given age range.** Having knowledge of age-related human characteristics allows teachers to make general predictions within an age range about what materials, interactions, and experiences will be safe, interesting, challenging, and within reach for children, and thus likely to best promote their learning and development. This dimension is sometimes called **age appropriate**.

2. **Consider what is known about each child as an individual.** Gathering information about the strengths, interests, and needs of each individual child in the group enables practitioners to adapt and be responsive to that individual variation.

3. **Consider what is known about the social and cultural contexts in which children live.** Learning about the values, expectations, and behavioral and linguistic conventions that shape children’s lives at home and in their communities allows teachers to create learning environments and experiences that are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for all children and their families.

In each of these three areas, the knowledge to be considered is substantial and changes over time. Intentional teachers make sure to stay informed both through ongoing professional development, which includes gaining information from new research, and through those avenues that will provide necessary information about the children they teach, their families, and their communities. Let’s examine each of these areas more closely and see what each contributes to the decisions teachers make.

**Consider What Is Known about Child Development and Learning**

During early childhood, it is possible to make relatively accurate predictions about children’s capabilities based on age ranges. Babies need constant care and careful supervision because they put everything in their mouths. Two-year-olds who have mastered walking waste no time in running headlong into furniture and walls. Preschoolers are fairly good communicators, but need help to keep expanding their vocabulary. Primary grade children are reasonably independent learners when motivated by the topic or activity.

Because children’s needs, interests, and abilities differ as they grow and change, developmentally appropriate environments for different age groups will look different. What differences can you see in these classrooms for infants/toddlers, preschoolers, and primary grade children?
Here’s an example of developmentally appropriate practice that works for babies:

If you are like most adults, your interaction with a baby may sound like a high-pitched voice saying this: "Hi baby. How are you this morning, baby, baby?" You pause, the infant moves his mouth, waves his arms, or just looks at you intently. And now you say, "Oh, you had a good sleep, did you? Are you ready to have some fun today?" When the baby gurgles you say, "You are ready, aren’t you? Jesse’s ready, ready, ready to play!"

Adults (and even older children) talk to babies differently than they do to each other. Researchers have dubbed this special kind of speech *motherese* or *parentese* and they have observed its use around the world. What’s more, they know that babies like it. Infants consistently prefer hearing parentese to adult conversation. In laboratory studies, they show this preference by turning their heads one way to trigger a tape of parentese more often than they turn it the other way to hear a tape of adult-to-adult conversation. This preference persists when the parentese is in a language the baby doesn’t usually hear. In other words, even though infants don’t know what the words mean, they prefer speech with the exaggerated intonation of parentese. This rhythmic quality of a voice holds "emotion-identifying" information that infants appear to enjoy. So it makes sense that adults exaggerate the rhythm of the speech they direct toward infants. The higher pitched sounds, slower tempo, and repetition of parentese may also draw the baby’s interest.

Adults—especially parents, family members, and teachers—consider what is developmentally appropriate every day without necessarily recognizing it. For instance, when selecting a toy for 2-year-old Hudson, his aunt chooses a schoolhouse with a handle for carrying. The toy has a label that indicates there are no small parts that can be swallowed. She determines that the toy is manageable for most toddlers whose fine motor skills are limited so they are unlikely to become frustrated. Because the toy is age appropriate, it should hold Hudson’s interest. Like most 2-year-olds, Hudson is beginning to engage in pretend play and also loves to carry his toys around with him.

Some characteristics that young children typically demonstrate at various times are common knowledge. For example, when a young panda cub makes his media debut, reporters uniformly observe that he behaves “like a toddler.” Readers immediately get the picture even without the description that follows—“He squirmed in the arms of his keepers, climbed and tumbled over a rock pile and walked through a small stream. He also showed a penchant for putting things in his mouth” (Barker, 2005).

Knowing age-related characteristics helps guide teachers’ expectations of children’s behavior and abilities, the organization of the environment, and the materials provided. They also guide teacher’s planning and affect their interactions with children. For an example of age-appropriate interaction, read the *What Works: Baby Talk* feature.

Consider What Is Individually Appropriate

One of the most basic principles of child development is that there are individual differences. In fact, children demonstrate a wide range of variability across every area of development—physical, cognitive, social, and emotional—while remaining within the range of “typical” development.

The development of some children falls outside the range of what’s typical in one aspect or another. For example, in some respects, children with disabilities or developmental delays and children who are gifted add further diversity to the range of individual differences. The expert lens feature, Including All Children: Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Children with Disabilities, illustrates this point.

Averages or norms never tell more than a small part of the story; far more informative is the range, that is, the large variation of growth or performance across different individuals within the age (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006). Picture a group of 4-year-old children. They range in height from 35 to 46 inches, and in weight from 30 to 55 pounds. One can already skip, while another still takes the stairs two feet at a time. One can read while another knows only a few letters. One converses fluently in two languages, while another has

Including All Children

Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Children with Disabilities

A child with a disability acts like a magnifying glass on the developmental appropriateness of an early childhood program. The basic elements of developmentally appropriate practice are necessary for inclusion to succeed. However, the converse is also true. When children with disabilities are included in programs that are not developmentally appropriate, it becomes difficult for the child with special needs—indeed, for all of the children—to make meaningful progress. Compare the experiences of these two young children:

Tara, a 4-year-old with autism, is sitting next to her teacher at circle time. The teacher is reading from a small-sized book, and many of the children cannot see the pictures very well, including Tara. The circle time has been in progress for over 20 minutes and many of the children are getting restless. Tara begins rocking back and forth and looking at the door. Without warning, the teacher stops reading the book and tells the children to stand up for a finger play. Tara bolts from the circle and runs to the water table. She begins splashing and yelling. The teacher stops and asks Tara to return to circle. When Tara does not return on her own volition, the assistant teacher physically moves her back to the circle, and a 10-minute struggle ensues. When Tara’s father comes to pick her up, the teacher describes “her bad day” and asks him to talk to Tara about listening at school.

Isaac is also 4 years old and also has a diagnosis of autism. He is sitting on a brightly colored carpet square, in between two of his preschool peers at circle time. His teacher is reading a book the class made called Friends, Friends, Who Do You See? It is adapted from Brown Bear, Brown Bear (Martin, 1996), but features pictures of the children in the class, paired with their names. Isaac loves the book, and reads along with the teacher. As the teacher reads each child’s names in the story, they get to stand up and move. After the story, it is time for singing. Isaac knows this because circle time happens in a similar routine each day.

The teacher pulls out the “song chart” featuring the pictures and titles of eight different songs. One song is about a train. Isaac loves trains and seems eager to hear the new song. He points to the “Trains on the track.” The teacher helps Isaac remove the song card. Isaac holds the card while the children sing. Then Isaac makes the sign for “play” with his hands. The teacher says, “Yes, Isaac it is time for centers.” She lets Isaac choose a center first, because she knows it is hard for him to wait. Isaac brings the teacher the song card, and then points to the picture of the water table. His teacher models, “I want to play at the. . . .” Isaac says, “Water table.” His teacher, proud of his increasing verbal skills, gives him a hug and says, “Off you go to the water table.” When Isaac’s mother picks him up from school, his teacher describes how often he used his words and which friends he played with at center time.

As is clear from Isaac’s case, developmentally appropriate practice provides the necessary foundation for successful inclusion. But individually appropriate adaptations are essential for children with disabilities and other special needs.
just mastered talking in complete sentences. One will play for extended periods with two or more friends, while another struggles to play cooperatively for even a short time.

Children also have individual personality traits and preferences, some of which are obvious even in early infancy. Some babies are feisty, while others are more passive. Some children stand back and watch for quite a while before attempting something new, and some plunge right in. Some children talk nonstop, while others cannot be enticed to speak up. One preschooler rides a tricycle with abandon, while another prefers to sit quietly with a puzzle or pegboard. A second grader loves to read and spend all of her free time with a book, while another struggles with reading but looks forward to math because it’s her best subject.

The term *individually appropriate* refers to teachers using what they know about the personalities, strengths, interests, and abilities of each individual child in the group to adapt for and be responsive to individual variation. Consider, for instance, two tricycle riders: The fearless rider may need more careful supervision to prevent injury, while the warier child may need extra encouragement and support to develop his large motor skills. Similarly, some children will need enriched experiences to accelerate their language development, while a few may need individual support to continue to build on their precocious reading ability. A withdrawn, timid child may need a great deal of emotional support to cope with life’s challenges, while another needs help controlling aggression to make friends.

With the individual differences that exist, teachers clearly cannot expect all children in a group to learn the same thing in the same way at the same time. Even when the teacher introduces a concept or reads a book to a whole group, each child will take away something different from the learning experience. Therefore, to help children progress, teachers must continually keep track of what children know and are able to do, what they are struggling with, and what is engaging their interest and meets their needs.

**Consider Children’s Social and Cultural Contexts**

All learning and development occur in and are influenced by social and cultural contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In fact, *appropriate behavior* is always culturally defined. The *cultural contexts a child grows up in* begin with the family and extend to include the cultural group or groups with which the family identifies. *Culture* refers to the behaviors, values, and beliefs that a group shares and passes on from one generation to the next. Because children share their cultural context with members of their group, cultural differences are differences between groups rather than individual differences. Therefore, cultural variation needs to be considered as well as individual variation in deciding what is developmentally appropriate.

Children learn the values, beliefs, expectations, and habitual patterns of behavior of the social and cultural contexts in their lives. Cultures, for example, have characteristic ways of showing respect; there may be different rules for how to properly greet an older or younger person, a friend, or stranger. Attitudes about time and personal space vary among cultures, as do the ways to take care of a baby and dress for different occasions. In fact, most of our experiences are filtered through the lenses of our cultural group. We typically learn cultural rules very early and very deeply, so they are not part of our conscious thought.

Social contexts of young children’s lives differ in ways such as these: Is the child growing up in a large family, or a family of one or two children? In a single-parent family, a two-parent family, with same-sex parents, or a household that includes extended family members? In an urban, suburban, or rural setting? Has the child been in group care settings from a young age, or is this the first time in a group program? What social and economic resources are available to the family? All of these situations frame the social context and impact children’s lives in unique ways.

For young children, what makes sense and how they respond to new experiences are fundamentally shaped by the social and cultural contexts to which they have become accustomed. To ensure that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful to children and their families—that is, to be *culturally appropriate*—teachers must have some knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live. Such knowledge helps teachers build on children’s prior experiences and learning so they can help children progress.
All young children must adjust when they move from the security and familiarity of their homes into schools or early childhood programs. The challenge is greatest, however, for children whose cultural experiences at home differ sharply from those predominating at the school or program. For these children, the transition can be confusing and frightening. Consider a Native American child, whose culture expects children to quietly listen and observe adults, entering a classroom where the teacher expects everyone to speak up. Think of how you feel, at least for a moment, when people around you are speaking a language you don’t understand. Even as an adult with all of our coping mechanisms intact, we tend to feel uncertain, ignorant, and uncomfortable. (Are they talking about us?)

For teachers, being responsive to all social and cultural variation can be challenging. Our own cultural experience is so integral to us that we are rarely aware of it. If we are in the position of power as a teacher, we must be especially careful to be aware of and respectful of those whose cultural backgrounds and accepted rules for behavior may be different from ours. Most importantly, we must be careful not to assume that our own cultural perspective is superior and make negative judgments based on our cultural variations. An example illustrates the potentially damaging result of such judgments:

A European American teacher is employed in a school serving a predominantly African American community. One of her principal teaching strategies is questioning. But she finds that her questions are often met with blank stares or disdain from the children and she assumes they don’t know the answers. She doesn’t realize that within their cultural community, people rarely ask questions that they already know the answers to.

To better accommodate the realities of cultural and linguistic diversity in schools and early childhood programs, teachers today need to work at being especially sensitive and responsive to perspectives of children and their families that may be different from their own. To broaden your own perspective, read the Culture Lens: Fostering Cultural Continuity feature.

Consider All You Know When Making Decisions

The three considerations that teachers must take into account when making decisions—knowledge about children’s learning and development, information about individual children, and information about the social and cultural contexts of children’s lives—should not be viewed in isolation. All three considerations, in fact, interact and influence each other; they are always intertwined in shaping children’s development and behavior. For example, children all over the world follow a similar developmental pattern when learning language. They all progress from cooing, babbling, one-word utterances, telegraphic speech (“Daddy up”), to short sentences and finally more complex sentences. However, a wide range of individual variation exists in language acquisition of children who are roughly the same age, because of both differences in language experience and developmental variation. At age 3, Joey speaks in one-word utterances, whereas his same-age cousin, Michael, expounds in paragraphs. Finally, each child speaks the language, including the dialect, of his or her own cultural group. Six-year-old Amelia speaks English to her mother and Spanish to her father. All of these factors influence children’s language development and how teachers think about supporting it optimally for all children.

Now let’s look at how the meshing of the three considerations plays out in the decisions of one primary grade teacher:

Frida Lopez has 22 children in her first-grade class. Her first challenge each year is to get to know the children very well. She spends time meeting with their families, engages in one-on-one conversations with children, observes their behavior and skills throughout the day, and sets up specific tasks to evaluate their skills such as literacy tasks or solving math problems with counters.

As she goes about getting to know children, she regularly assesses their abilities and interests in relation to what she knows from her study of child development, the
Part 1  The Early Childhood Education Profession: Foundations

Culture Lens

Take a moment to think about what you understand about culture. Do you tend to think about culture only as characteristic of children and families who are “culturally different”? Does the concept of culture only apply to some children? Actually, it is important to remember that every child is socialized in a cultural group, and the most important elements influencing children’s development are really aspects of their cultural experiences that are often the hardest to observe.

What people sometimes think of as “cultural” are the products that culture produces, such as dress or holiday celebrations. These are the surface features of culture. But culture produces more indiscernible behaviors and attitudes that emerge from the same set of rules as the surface features of culture. These deep structural aspects of culture act as much more powerful influences on children’s development than the surface features. For example, if the cultural group believes that women should not be seen by men except for those in the immediate family, a woman’s mode of dress will reflect this value. At the same time, this cultural belief will have much farther reaching effects on her behavior and life choices than simply how she dresses. Consider an example in an early childhood classroom:

It is circle time in kindergarten and the children are supposed to bring an object from home that has writing on it. Most of the children eagerly seek their turn, waving their hands widely, and showing off how well they can read the words. Jai has brought something but is clearly not eager to share. The teacher assumes that he can’t read the words. So, she doesn’t call on him.

As in all developmental domains, culture influences the expression of emotions. Although emotions such as fear, anger, and happiness are part of human interactions in all cultural groups, variations emerge in the way they are expressed. Jai, who is from India, is from a cultural group that avoids drawing too much attention to individuals or expressing emotions too openly. Children from other, more individualistic cultures such as the United States, are generally encouraged to express their feelings openly. These cultural differences account for Jai’s behavior and that of the other children in his class more than their reading abilities.

Cultural differences do not mean that one way is right and the other wrong. They simply demonstrate that there is a wide variety of developmental patterns that can be explained best by understanding the cultural context in which development occurs.

Curriculum goals, and her experiences teaching other 6- and 7-year-olds. She finds that a few children exceed her expectations in reading or social skills, whereas others are significantly behind their peers in some areas. Each child has a unique personality and profile of abilities, and Frida becomes more aware of these.

Neela has Down syndrome, and Frida has already met with her parents and the team of special education professionals, who create and implement an individualized plan for her. After a few weeks, Frida becomes concerned that another child, Almonzo, may have an unidentified language delay. In the case of the six children whose home languages are not ones Frida knows, she recognizes that she must take extra steps to find out about them. Using community volunteers and, in one case, a paid translator, Frida connects with the families to build relationships and to learn what capabilities the children exhibit in their homes and communities.

So we see that in meeting the children, Frida seamlessly draws on her knowledge of child development and learning, as well as her knowledge of them as individuals and members of cultural groups. Precisely because children are so different and their abilities vary so greatly, Frida will need to draw on a wide repertoire of teaching strategies to help them achieve developmentally appropriate goals. Consider the three dimensions of decisions about developmentally appropriate teaching while reading the feature How Would You Respond?: Teacher Decision Making.
So far we have described the areas of knowledge that teachers consider in making decisions about developmentally appropriate practice—what teachers need to know and think about. Now we turn to the work of the teachers—what do early childhood teachers do? What are the dimensions of practice that describe the teacher’s role?

**Understanding the Complex Role of the Teacher**

According to the NAEYC’s (2009a) guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice, the complex job of an early childhood teacher has five interrelated dimensions: (1) creating a caring community of learners, (2) teaching to enhance learning and development, (3) planning curriculum to achieve important goals, (4) assessing children’s learning and development, and (5) establishing reciprocal relationships with families. One way to remember these dimensions is to visualize the five points of a star, as depicted in Figure 3.1. Each of the five points is necessary for the star to be complete, and they are all interrelated—take one away and the figure is no longer a star.

It may be helpful, in fact, to think of it as a “mariner’s star” (NAEYC, 1998a). Seafaring people use the stars to guide their way, but without considerable knowledge of the stars’ positioning and their relation to navigation, mindlessly following a star won’t lead to a destination. So it is with the mariner’s star of early childhood teaching. Each of the star’s points links to a set of guidelines that represent a large body of knowledge about early childhood education. Just as the stars guide seafaring people, the mariner’s star helps guide teachers’ professional behavior; but without that strong foundation of knowledge, the guidelines themselves have less meaning.

In the following sections, we introduce each aspect of the teacher’s role in accordance with NAEYC’s guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice. Each of these aspects of the teacher’s role is described in a later chapter.

**How Would You Respond?**

**Teacher Decision Making**

**The Situation** Suppose you have recently changed jobs to a new elementary school and the location draws families with a wider range of cultural and language backgrounds than you have worked with previously. There is a modest budget for adding books to the classrooms, and the teachers also plan to make use of the nearby public library. You will be teaching second grade.

**What to Do?** As you approach the selection of books, which of the following ideas are consistent with the principles of developmentally appropriate practice?

- Avoid books designed for children of third grade or older.
- Focus on books with very few words so that children who don’t speak much English will be able to understand and enjoy them.
- Select good books without reference to language or culture.
- Ask families to share stories and help make books in the languages they speak at home to add to the classroom library.
- Take the children to the library and let them pick books that interest them.

Do you have other thoughts for improving the school’s reading materials?
Create a Caring Community of Learners

An early childhood setting—whether it serves infants and toddlers, preschoolers, kindergartners, or second graders—needs to be a caring community of learners. The term caring community of learners incorporates several key ideas that characterize early childhood education: (1) Children's care and education are equally important; (2) children learn through positive relationships with adults and other children; and (3) the learning context matters, referring to both the indoor and outdoor environments, how the environments are organized, and the materials and equipment they contain.

Children learn when they feel safe and cared for. They thrive in an environment in which they see positive images that reflect their own identity and where they see their own contributions to the community, such as photos of themselves and of their families, as well as seeing their own work displayed. They also see examples throughout the community that reinforce their cultural identity. The messages are clear to each child: You belong here. We care about and support each other. You have important things to contribute to this group. You will thrive here.

The foundation of young children’s learning is in positive relationships with other people who are responsive to them. At the same time, the early childhood setting is a learning community where adults and children learn with and from each other. Each child’s thinking can build on or challenge that of another. When Josue tells Willa she can’t be the doctor because she’s a girl, Willa promptly informs him, “I go to Dr. Ashai and she’s a lady, so there.” Josue has to adjust his concept of doctor to include women as well as men.
In a caring community, children acquire the ability to regulate their own emotions and behavior and to make friends. Teachers actively teach children social and emotional skills and engage in individualized interventions for children who persistently demonstrate challenging behaviors such as aggression.

**Teach to Enhance Learning and Development**

Teaching seems the most obvious aspect of the teacher’s role, but it isn’t simple at all. Early childhood teachers typically do not conform to the images that come to mind for many adults when they think of “teaching”—the teacher standing in front of a blackboard or at a podium lecturing. Teaching simply looks different in the early childhood setting, and it takes many forms.

Effective early childhood teachers know the children in their group very well. They thoughtfully plan the learning experiences and environment with these children in mind while also keeping in mind the learning goals. They use a variety of teaching strategies to help each child develop and learn. And they guide young children to become socially responsible, self-regulating, contributing members of the community.

Teachers also use various learning contexts such as teacher-guided group work, including both large-group and small-group preplanned experiences, and periods of play and engagement in which children primarily guide their own activity with the support of teachers (Epstein, 2007a; Roskos & Christie, 2008; Siraj-Blatchford, Muttock, Sylva, Gilden, & Bell, 2003). Teachers use various ways of grouping children for learning; they may gather a reading group of similar ability level or organize a group of children with different language abilities to work together on a project. Teachers’ behavior needs to vary with the setting as well. In addition, routines such as eating meals and transitioning from one place or activity to another are all potentially valuable learning contexts if teachers use these activities as opportunities for one-on-one conversations with children or to reinforce a learning goal through singing a song or reciting a poem.

**Plan Curriculum to Achieve Important Goals**

If developmentally appropriate practice tends to focus on the how of teaching, then curriculum is the what, the content that children are expected to learn. Curriculum is a written plan that describes the knowledge and skills to be taught in the educational program and the learning experiences through which teaching takes place (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006, p. 61).

Currently, there is increased demand for scientifically based curriculum that is based on research about important learning goals that predict later achievement, the sequences in which concepts and skills build on others, and the teaching strategies that have proven effective. Whatever the process through which a curriculum is selected, developed, or planned, to be effective it must be implemented with attention to individual differences and cultural variation among children (NAEYC & National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education [NAECS/SDE], 2003).

Good curriculum, whether published resources used in school districts or teacher developed, offers teachers flexibility and
ways of adapting, often providing many more suggested activities or materials than teachers could possibly use. Thus, they have many further decisions to make. Teachers need to be very familiar with the curriculum plan, especially the key learning and development outcomes for children—that is, what children should know and be able to do as a result of their participation in this program.

Assess Children’s Development and Learning

In the current era of educational accountability, assessment is often a controversial topic. However, it is an integral component of developmentally appropriate practice. Assessment is the process of observing and documenting the work children do and how they do it as the basis for a variety of educational decisions. Assessment is important because teachers must draw on assessment information about individual children in an ongoing, systematic process to understand children’s learning and development.

Children, especially very young children, are moving targets. What they can’t do today, they can do tomorrow. What they didn’t know or understand yesterday may gradually become clear or they may have an “Aha!” moment of recognition. Their development may follow a typical though somewhat slower trajectory in one area or they may be in need of intervention for a serious developmental delay. To address any of these situations, teachers must use appropriate, accurate tools to assess children.

Each decision that teachers make about children has consequences. The more important and lasting the consequence, the more vital it is that the decision is based on multiple sources of information, including information from parents.

Build Relationships with Families and Communities

Young children do not come with résumés; they come with families. The NAEYC (2009a) guidelines emphasize the importance of teachers and administrators developing reciprocal relationships with children’s families. Reciprocal refers to a two-way relationship, in which information and power are shared evenly. Such a relationship is based on mutual respect, trust, cooperation, and shared responsibility. A reciprocal relationship requires regular open communication and a willingness to negotiate differences toward shared goals.

We’ve already seen that in order to teach young children effectively teachers must get to know each child well. The younger the child, the more teachers must rely on family members as key informants about children’s competencies, interests, needs, and cultural experiences. Young children’s competencies are not always apparent, especially if they have been acquired in a cultural context that is different from that of the teacher. For example, a child may know colors, basic shapes, and be able to count up to 20 in Russian, yet demonstrate none of this knowledge in English at school. Through a relationship with the parents, however, this teacher can ascertain that she needs to help the child learn the English words for concepts he already knows, rather than teach these concepts. This allows both the teacher and child the opportunity to use what he already knows and move on to other important concepts more efficiently.

Seeing the Teacher’s Role in Context

In each aspect of their work, whether creating a caring community, teaching, planning curriculum, assessing, or working with families,
teachers must draw on a broad base of information to make useful decisions. The following example illustrates how the five dimensions of the teacher’s role come together during a memorable experience for a beginning teacher:

Scotty’s teacher, Gina, believes him to be the “bad boy” in his preschool class. His teacher feels she is constantly correcting what he has done wrong. One day, a fight breaks out in the block corner and a chorus of voices arises, shouting, “Scotty did it!” His teacher sighs, not surprised by these events until she remembers that Scotty isn’t there that day. She realizes that her focus on Scotty’s misdeeds has made him the “bad boy” in everyone’s eyes.

Her realization forces Gina to reflect on her own and Scotty’s behavior. She realizes that she doesn’t really know Scotty, and spends time systematically observing him. Soon, she discovers strengths she can help him build such as his exceptional fine motor skills and comes to see that there is much Scotty can do well. She gives him opportunities to use these skills such as cutting up the oranges for snack, and finally catching him doing something right for a change. Gina expands how she sees Scotty by meeting with his mother so together they can begin to focus on his positive behavior rather than always punishing his missteps. Gradually, Scotty’s teacher notices that his behavior improves. As a result, both Gina and his mother begin to enjoy him more. With more support and a sense of accomplishment, he makes friends with several other children.

In making professional decisions, one strategy teachers should always consider is to broaden their own perspective, just as Gina did. They need to take into consideration as many points of view as possible—to “widen the lens” with which they see children, their families, and the educational process.

**Widening the Lens: Moving from Either/Or to Both/And Thinking**

Questions of educational practices in the United States are often dichotomized as either/or choices. Is phonics or vocabulary more important in learning to read? Should preschool stress social-emotional development or cognitive development? Should early childhood programs have child-initiated or teacher-directed experience? These either/or choices oversimplify the complex processes of becoming literate or developing the whole child. Either/or thinking assumes that there is one right answer to a complex question. Instead, children would be better served and educators more effective if the questions were addressed with both/and thinking. Both/and thinking rejects simplistic answers to complex questions and requires diverse perspectives and several possible correct answers to be considered.

To avoid either/or thinking, it is useful to use the analogy of widening the lens. Think of yourself as holding a camera and adjusting the view by adjusting the lens. Depending on how you adjust the lens, your view and, therefore, your perspective changes. You might zoom in on one child’s expression, or you might zoom out to see the whole room arrangement. You could bring even more information into the picture, especially with a video camera, perhaps including the child’s friends, extended family, or community. In fact, to engage in developmentally appropriate decision making, teachers must indeed widen their views. Just as the camera lens adjusts to display different views, teachers allow their minds to expand and accommodate several ideas at once.

As we have discussed, children of similar ages are both alike and they are different. Likewise, children of the same cultural group share some characteristics but not all. When you widen the lens, you will find that your view broadens and you can incorporate more information. As a result, you are less likely to get stuck in either/or thinking. When you widen the lens through which you look at children, the curriculum, teaching practices, assessment, and families—all aspects of your work—you begin to recognize the complexity and interrelationships among the principles that guide early childhood practice.
Consider the following example that demonstrates the power of widening the lens. When teachers are willing to look beyond the view they have held, they enhance their effectiveness in their work with children and families, as in the following situation:

Ms. Grantham is the director of a Head Start program. Several parents complain to her that they aren’t seeing worksheets or similar products showing their children’s learning coming home in the backpacks or displayed in the classroom. Her program doesn’t use worksheets because their philosophy of developmentally appropriate practice is based on children’s active engagement. Ms. Grantham believes that worksheets are just busy work for children and don’t really teach them anything.

At first, she thinks that the parents are just uninformed about good early childhood education. But she asks a few more questions to better understand their perspective. Ms. Grantham comes to see that both she and the parents want the children to succeed—in the wider view, they are in agreement. And what the families are asking for is evidence that the children are in fact learning and on track to succeed in school.

Reflecting on the parents’ legitimate desire, Mrs. Grantham realizes that she could do a much better job of sharing with the families concrete samples of the children’s work that show what they are learning. She starts to meet with families regularly about what children are doing and learning. She displays the children’s work, describes what the child has learned and will be learning next, and what she and the teachers are doing to help build the child’s skills and knowledge.

Now, it’s your turn. What do you see when you widen your lens? Try to think of several examples where widening the lens would help you be a better teacher or improve your relationships with family members, college professors, or work colleagues.

Examining the Research

The basic research question regarding any educational practice is this: Does it work? Is this educational practice effective in helping children achieve important learning outcomes? Because developmentally appropriate practice involves many different teaching behaviors and aspects of classroom organization, research on the broad construct of developmentally appropriate practice is difficult to conduct. However, subsequent chapters present the research base for each dimension of the teacher’s role, and area of the curriculum.

Research Reviews

One way of thinking about the research basis for developmentally appropriate practice is to consider the broader early childhood knowledge base about children’s learning and development and the specific practices that are effective in promoting it. This knowledge is summarized in major scientific reports such as *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers* (Bowman et al., 2001) and *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), and *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy* (Center on the Developing Child, 2007).
Similarly, a vast amount of evidence demonstrates the lasting positive effects of high-quality early childhood programs (see Barnett, 2008). Although these studies were not designed to evaluate developmentally appropriate practice per se, the practices employed in effective programs were consistent with NAECY’s guidelines. In short, well-grounded research about learning and development, summarized in such reports, is the basis for NAECY’s work on developmentally appropriate practice and provides solid guidance for early childhood educators.

Research on Elements of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Some studies examined effects of developmentally appropriate practice in preschool or kindergarten compared to “inappropriate” practices. These studies typically have defined appropriate classrooms as those characterized by child-initiated activity, active learning, problem solving, and positive, warm relationships between teachers and children. On the other hand, inappropriate classrooms are characterized by didactic lessons, heavy reliance on whole-group instruction, and emphasis on seatwork and rote learning. Much of the feedback in such classrooms tends to be teachers’ correcting of children.

Effects on Social-Emotional Development

In observing numerous preschool classrooms, Stipek and her colleagues (1998) found that positive affect among teachers and children seemed to go along with developmentally appropriate practice, whereas negative affect was more likely to be found in classrooms using more inappropriate practices. Recent observational research in prekindergarten and primary grade classrooms also finds that positive, warm relationships with teachers that are developmentally appropriate promote both academic success and social skills (Hamre & Pianta, 2005, 2007). Research following children from infancy to age 4 in child care programs also finds that high-quality, developmentally appropriate experiences and interactions with teachers contribute positively to children’s development (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2003).

Several studies of developmentally appropriate practice looked at children’s social or emotional outcomes. For example, studies relating teaching practice to stress behaviors in children found significantly fewer stress-related behaviors in preschool and kindergarten children in more developmentally appropriate classrooms compared to children in less appropriate classrooms (Burts et al., 1992; Hart et al., 1998). Children in less appropriate preschools have also been found to score lower on measures of motivation (Stipek, Feller, Daniels, & Milburn, 1995).

Effects on Learning

A growing body of evidence supports the effectiveness of developmentally appropriate practices in enhancing children’s learning (Huffman & Speer, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003). In a study examining the effect of developmentally appropriate practice on the academic achievement of urban kindergarten and first-grade children, children in the more developmentally appropriate classrooms scored higher on measures of letter/word identification and applied problem solving (Huffman & Speer, 2000). Another study found developmentally appropriate practice in Head Start to be positively related to children’s school readiness and cognitive development (Bryant, Burchinal, Lau, & Sparling, 1994).

One large-scale, statewide study of prekindergarten in South Carolina evaluated the effects of implementing the HighScope approach, which is congruent with principles of developmentally appropriate practice, on the later academic achievement of economically disadvantaged children (Frede & Barnett, 1992). The researchers found that children’s increased academic achievement in first-grade classrooms was related to moderate or high levels of developmentally appropriate practice in prekindergarten. Similarly, Burts et al.
(1993) found that children who attended more developmentally appropriate kindergartens had better reading grades in first grade.

A more recent study demonstrated the effectiveness of building on a developmentally appropriate framework such as HighScope with additional research-based teaching strategies (Bierman et al., 2008), such as those we describe in this book. This Head Start intervention program involved brief lessons on literacy and social skills, “hands-on” activities, and specific teaching strategies designed to promote children’s social-emotional competencies, language development, and emergent literacy skills. Materials were also provided to parents to enhance children’s development at home. The program significantly improved children’s vocabulary, emergent literacy, emotional understanding, social problem solving, social behavior, and learning engagement.

The Future of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

One of the most important functions of NAEYC’s work on developmentally appropriate practice has been to further discussion and debate in the field about teaching practices. Given the history of the field, it is likely that this topic will continue to be debated in the future. What aspects are most likely to continue to provoke thought? Undoubtedly the realities of diversity and changing cultural contexts in our country will continue to raise questions about what is culturally as well as developmentally appropriate. Increased demands for accountability and the challenge to close the achievement gap raise the stakes over which practices can be successfully defended. Likewise, debates about what belongs in the curriculum have been a constant and will continue in the future, but are likely to be driven more by research than in the past.

The word appropriate is a culturally laden term and thus will continue to provoke controversy. Similarly, it is difficult to counteract the tendency of teachers and other professionals to emphasize “typical development” over individual differences and cultural variations (Graue, Kroeger, & Brown, 2003). After all, the first can be learned by reading books and journals, whereas the latter two require ongoing assessment of children, building relationships with families, and reflecting on how our own cultural perspectives influence our judgments and behavior.

To be developmentally appropriate, practices must contribute to children’s learning and development. Therefore, this book focuses on recommended teaching practices, which must be responsive to children’s individual development and cultural variation to be deemed appropriate. At the same time, we also focus on whether those practices help children achieve important learning goals. By definition, developmentally appropriate practices should be effective practices. To be effective, teachers must know children, they must know how to teach, and they must know what to teach. Each of these areas of knowledge must be informed by research. Figure 3.2 describes these components of effective, research-based practice.

Ultimately, the truest measure of developmentally appropriate practice is seeing children joyfully, physically, and intellectually engaged in meaningful learning about their world and everyone and everything in it (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Effective Practice = Knowing Children + Knowing How to Teach + Knowing What to Teach

Figure 3.2 Effective, Research-Based Practice
Revisiting Mr. Washington’s Classroom

At the beginning of this chapter, we met Olivia who was somewhat timidly encountering school for the first time. Having explored the basic premises of developmentally appropriate practice, now we can see Olivia’s experience with a more informed eye. Her classroom with its age-appropriate materials, furnishings, and environment not only made Olivia feel comfortable but also encouraged her involvement. Furthermore, her teacher, Mr. Washington, drew on his knowledge of how children develop and learn by working to establish a warm, positive relationship with Olivia right from the start. He also provided Olivia with a learning experience that would build on what she was already able to do, such as her proficiency with puzzles.

At the same time, Mr. Washington demonstrated the importance of paying attention to what is individually appropriate. He made Olivia feel welcome by sending her a personal postcard, designating her cubby with her name, and piquing Olivia’s interest in puzzles. Finally, Mr. Washington was culturally appropriate—sensitive to the cultural context in which Olivia lives—using his own language attempts and a skilled translator to communicate with and reassure Olivia’s grandmother. In so doing, he demonstrated that he values Olivia’s family, their language, and cultural background. Taken together, the actions in that brief scenario demonstrate the teacher’s broad base of knowledge, and bode well for Olivia’s successful transition to school.

Chapter Summary

- Developmentally appropriate practice is teaching that is attuned to children’s ages, experience, abilities, and interests, and that helps them attain challenging and achievable goals.
- Intentional teachers have a purpose for everything that they do, are thoughtful and prepared, and can explain the rationale for their decisions and actions to other teachers, administrators, or parents.
- Decisions about developmentally appropriate practice are based on knowledge of child development and learning (what is age appropriate), knowledge about children as individuals, and knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which children live (what is culturally appropriate).
- The role of the early childhood teacher has five interrelated dimensions: (1) creating a caring community of learners, (2) teaching to enhance learning and development, (3) planning curriculum to meet important goals, (4) assessing children’s learning and development, and (5) establishing reciprocal relationships with families.
- “Widening the lens” is a metaphor to help teachers remember to consider diverse perspectives and move beyond either/or thinking to both/and thinking when solving problems or making decisions about practice.
- Well-grounded research about learning and development is the basis for NAEYC’s position statements on developmentally appropriate practice and provides solid guidance for early childhood educators.
1. Observe a group of three or more toddlers and note ways in which they are developmentally similar and ways in which their individuality comes through. Reflect on whether the materials and environment are age appropriate. Decide how well you think the teacher is able to meet the individual needs of very young children in a group.

2. Observe a child with special needs in an inclusive preschool program. Reflect on whether the program is developmentally appropriate as well as individually appropriate for this child. Decide how it might be improved to better serve children with disabilities.

3. Observe in a school or child care center. Look for evidence of the children’s cultural and linguistic groups. Reflect on the difficulty of going beyond the outward manifestations of culture to understand the deeper meanings. Decide what you might do as a teacher of children from a cultural group very different from your own.

4. Observe the children in a kindergarten or primary grade classroom. Reflect on whether they appear to be mentally engaged with what is going on, and whether the expectations for their behavior are developmentally appropriate. Decide what you think the teacher could do to better meet the developmental and learning needs of the age group, as well as those of individual children.

5. Reflect on your own experiences as a first, second, or third grader. Can you remember situations where you felt like your teacher understood your individual needs and interests? What did the teacher do? How did it make you feel?