Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

An Introduction for Teachers of Children 3 to 6

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Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) means teaching young children in ways that

◆ meet children where they are, as individuals and as a group; and
◆ help each child reach challenging and achievable goals that contribute to his or her ongoing development and learning.

There’s a little more to it than that, but that’s the main idea.

For early childhood teachers, understanding how young children learn and develop is essential. The more you can know about and tune into the way the children in your class think and learn, the more effective and satisfying your work with them will be. You will gain a clearer sense of direction to guide your actions, from setting up the classroom to planning curriculum.

Meeting children where they are

Our own school-day memories are likely to be full of laboring over worksheets and tests or sitting in desks while listening to the teacher lecture. These images don’t give us much help for creating good early childhood classrooms. Elsewhere in this book, you’ll be reading more about how young children learn

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and how this varies with age and level of development. A broad picture of learning and development and what children are like at different ages, however, is not all you need in order to teach in a developmentally appropriate way. You won’t meet with much success if you consider only what is “typical” of an age group, and if you try to teach children in a one-size-fits-all way. Let’s step out of the early childhood setting for a moment and visit an everyday scene that illustrates both of these points.

Coach Todd is a winning soccer coach in a league for girls ages 13–15. He has a good sense of what girls this age enjoy, what they’re capable of, and what’s usually tough for them, and he has experience in what works in coaching them. Bringing this general knowledge with him on the first day of practice, he knows he won’t use the advanced techniques he might with college varsity players, nor will he start out too simply by explaining, “You use your foot to kick the ball.” He can make some general plans based on his understanding of what is typical of this age group.

Now, as this season’s girls take the field for the first time, Coach Todd watches each one closely and also watches how the team plays together. He gets a feel for each player—her strengths and weaknesses, her temperament, how much experience she has. Based on all this, the coach decides where to start the girls’ training, and then keeps watching and making adjustments for each individual player and the team as a whole as the season goes along.

A successful coach like Coach Todd knows he has to meet learners where they are, as individuals and as a group. Pitch the instruction too low and you not only waste learners’ time but also show disrespect; pitch it too high and they feel incompetent and frustrated. This is a basic fundamental of any teaching.

Good classroom teachers continually observe children’s play and their interaction with the physical environment and with other children in order to learn about each child’s interests, abilities, and developmental progress. On the basis of this individualized information, along with general knowledge about the age group, we plan experiences that enhance children’s learning and
development. With a classroom of 4-year-olds, for example, meeting learners where they are might look something like this:

Marica notices that Tim has become fascinated with an anthill on the playground and suggests he get the magnifying glass to examine the ants and their activities more closely. A little later she checks back to find him on his stomach in the dirt, magnifying glass in hand. She decides that tomorrow she’ll bring in a book on ants, maybe even help the child find a good Web site on what ants do—or both of these things.

Because some children in her class understand only a little English, Lisa knows she will want to provide nonverbal clues to meaning wherever possible, for example, pictures, objects, gestures, and demonstrations.

Several of the children in Ross’s class never go to the computer area, and he learns their families do not have computers. He arranges opportunities to involve the children in doing simple things on the computer that relate to their favorite activities and interests, such as creating signs for their restaurant in the dramatic play area.

**Helping children reach challenging and achievable goals**

Meeting learners where they are is essential, but no good coach simply leaves his players where they are. Coach Todd’s aim is always to help each girl improve her soccer skills and understanding as much as she is able, while also making sure she still enjoys the game and wants to continue playing it.

In teaching, these same principles hold. Learners will gain most from materials or experiences that build on what they already know and can do, but also make them stretch a reasonable amount toward what they don’t yet know or cannot yet do.

Take the case of picking out books for 4-year-olds. The simple board books that would be fine for a toddler or even an older infant would not be challenging for most preschoolers, and chapter books would be well beyond the ability of most 4-year-olds for several more years. The preschool child is more likely to benefit from picture books that not only use many words he already knows in familiar ways but also offer a range of new vocabulary, sentence structure, and
I do love a catch
that's--CHOMP!---
challenging AND
achievable!
expression that he has to work a bit to master. Because such books introduce him to new ideas and experiences, they will propel the child forward and get him ready for more advanced books. Equally important, he will find the just-within-reach books very satisfying and engrossing.

When such a fit exists—that is, when materials or experiences are challenging but not unreasonably beyond the child’s ability—we say those materials or experiences are developmentally appropriate for that learner.

* * *

Here are a few generalizations, then, that can be made about developmentally appropriate teaching:

◆ Meet learners where they are, taking into account their physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development and characteristics.

◆ Identify goals for children that are both challenging and achievable—a stretch, but not an impossible leap.

◆ Recognize that what makes something challenging and achievable will vary, depending on the individual learner’s development in all areas; her store of experiences, knowledge, and skills; and the context within which the learning opportunity takes place.

A cornerstone of developmentally appropriate teaching is intentionality. Teaching that meets learners where they are and that helps them to reach challenging and achievable goals does not happen by chance. In everything good teachers do—from setting up the classroom to assessing children to planning the curriculum—they are intentional. They are purposeful and thoughtful about the actions they take, and they base their actions on the outcomes the program is trying to help children reach. Even in responding to unexpected opportunities—“teachable moments”—the intentional teacher is guided by those outcomes.
An intentional teacher has clearly defined learning goals for children, thoughtfully chooses teaching strategies that will enable children to achieve these goals, and continually assesses children’s progress and adjusts strategies to reach those goals. Having their goals and plans in mind, intentional teachers are well prepared to tell others—parents, administrators, colleagues—about what they are doing. Not only do they know what to do, they also know why they are doing it and can describe that rationale.