

Developmentally Appropriate Practices

By Susan Parker

In the education lingo, we refer to the set of core ideas that inform the work of our teachers as Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP). Though psychologists and educators had used the concept for years, The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) better defined DAP for the teaching community with a more specific description in the 1980s. This description was based on what early childhood educators know about young children through child development theory, research, and practice.

DAP means teaching young children in ways that:

1. Meet children where they are. If we meet children where they are, then we don't look just at what is typical for an age group. We don't assume that "one size fits all." Instead, the teacher determines, through careful observations of her class and of individuals, a child's interests, abilities, and developmental progress.
2. Help each child reach challenging and achievable goals. Achievable goals depend on individual learners—his/her development, experiences, knowledge, and skills.

The cornerstone of developmentally appropriate teaching is *intentionality*: Every little aspect—from setting up the classroom to assessing children to planning curriculum—is all intentional. Worksheets and drills are much easier for a teacher to implement than customizing every detail of the day in a "developmentally appropriate" classroom.

Why do we choose this philosophy? Research tells us that young children learn best through the following:

- *Relationships with nurturing, responsive adults.* These relationships promote not only children's social competence and emotional development but also their academic learning. Research shows that use of primarily responsive language is associated with children's higher self-esteem. The interactions we have with children should be encouraging, non-evaluative and should focus on the child's effort. For example, statements like "you worked so hard on that" or "You painted the whole *page*" are intrinsically motivating. If we praise children for the work they do, this may discourage self-directed learning, since it is the verbal rewards and not love of what they are doing that will drive the child's efforts.
- *Active, hands-on involvement.* As children play, explore, experience and interact with people, they are always trying to make sense of those experiences. "Hands-on" learning also means "mind-on" learning. We want to engage children's thinking processes and encourage them to investigate, question and ponder problems. Some easy questions to ask to extend the play or to take it to a higher level: "*What do you think...?*" "*Why do you think...?*" "*How did this happen?*"

- *Meaningful experiences.* These experiences help children connect information and concepts to what they already know and understand. For instance, a child with younger siblings may appreciate and enjoy books about babies.
- *Constructing their understanding of the world.* Young learners are always constructing their knowledge or understanding of the world; it helps them make sense of their environment. I remember when my daughter was just learning the word "ball"-- we had a number of balls around the house, which she was able to identify and name, but what she inaccurately identified one night as a "ball" was actually my father-in-law's stomach! Children will eventually learn the adult meaning for words like "ball," but it requires construction on the part of the child. Play is a powerful way for children to work through and understand aspects of their lives that they don't understand fully.

We spend a large part of our class day in "play." Research shows that self-initiated, teacher-supported play benefits children. When children play, they engage in many important tasks, such as developing and practicing newly acquired skills, using language, taking turns, making friends and regulating emotions and behavior according to the demands of the situation. Studies show that young children's engagement in high-level play is one of the best predictors of later school success.

Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Early Literacy Development

In 1998, the International Reading Association and the National Association for Education of Young Children co-authored a position statement titled "Learning to Read and Write: Developmentally Appropriate Practices." The statement focuses on children as active constructors of meaning. We, as teachers and parents, play a critical role in providing children with meaningful experiences and in supporting their learning.

The research-based statement notes that in order for children to become skilled readers, "they need to develop a rich language and conceptual knowledge base, a broad vocabulary, and verbal reasoning skills to understand messages conveyed through print." At the same time, it recognizes that children also must develop code-related skills: "...an understanding that spoken words are composed of smaller elements of speech, the idea that letters represent these sounds, and the knowledge that there are systematic correspondences between sounds and spellings." These skills develop interactively, not in isolation.

An example cited in the study demonstrates what happens when literacy skills are taught independent from meaning. The authors visited a classroom using a "Letter of the Week Curriculum." When they entered, they found children cutting out the letter "I" and pasting it on a piece of paper. When one of the interviewers asked the teacher the objective for the activity, the teacher said the children were learning about the letter "I." When the children were asked what they were learning, they said they were learning how to cut and paste. The children's understanding of letters was so limited that they could only relate the activity to experiences they already knew—cutting and pasting.

How does this information guide us as parents and teachers? What can we do in our classrooms to ensure that these literacy skills develop “interactively”? Listed below are some simple suggestions that you can use when co-oping or at home:

- Write names on work. Ask if the child wants a name written and if so, where, and then spell the letters aloud while writing.
- If a child offers information about a drawing or other work, offer to write it down.
- Use any opportunity to demonstrate written language/reading.
- Use the dramatic play area to generate written language. For example, set up a grocery store: make lists, label foods, write receipts. (If the child is not writing letters, encourage the child to do the best he/she can. Scribbling is a prewriting skill).
- Make lists when needed to keep track of turn taking.
- Point out environmental print, such as stop signs, yield signs, traffic lights, labels in the classroom. This is reading just as much as reading a newspaper.
- Read whenever possible. Show your child directionality: how the words are read left to right and how the pages also go from left to right. Model different reading strategies, such as:
 - Asking children to predict what may happen next
 - Pausing to let children fill in the blank or to make a prediction while reading aloud. Dr. Seuss books are great for this because of all the rhyming.
 - Focusing on repetitive words and phrases, and encourage children to repeat aloud. (A great book for this is *The Teeny Tiny Woman*—it’s one of our big books).