

D.A.P. in the Classroom

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As early childhood educators, we have all most likely heard the term, “developmentally appropriate practices (DAP)”. However, being familiar with the phrase, DAP, and understanding DAP are two completely different things. In order to understand DAP, we need to investigate the definition of DAP and consider what DAP looks like in an early childhood classroom.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is a national organization focused on the education of young children through developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) and the on-going support of early childhood professionals. NAEYC (2009) defines DAP as “an approach to teaching grounded in research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about effective early education” (para. 1). There are three main areas of consideration that drive the implementation of DAP:

- instructional decisions depend on research-based knowledge and a keen understanding of child development
- educators regard each child as an individual so that activities and curriculum meet the child’s unique needs and development
- educators and early childhood centers address each child’s cultural background and values to keep learning meaningful, relevant, and respectful to the child and his/her family (NAEYC, 2009; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009).

Working in an early childhood classroom requires constant decision making - from simple, automatic decisions to more detailed, complex ones (Perry, 2012). It is the complex decisions that demand a solid understanding of child development and current research because these decisions the impact the whole child (NAEYC, 2009). According to Perry (2012), “a teacher reflecting on what is happening in the classroom might consider such factors as knowledge about children in general (i.e., norms and stages), what is known about individual children, and what the teacher knows based on personal relationships with the children” (p. 131-132). This sometimes subconscious reflection stems from the intentionality with which we approach our profession. Are we spending time developing our own understanding of the developmental stages of early childhood? Do we stay abreast of early childhood research by reading research-based articles and attending relevant training? Is there a time for reflection and evaluation of our own classroom practices? With deliberate, intentional effort, early childhood educators become equipped with the right tools to make informed decisions in their early childhood classrooms for the group as a whole as well as for each, individual child.

Seeing every child as an individual and as part of the group is critical with respect to scaffolding learning. Years of research have provided us with an accepted list of developmental stages for children as they grow. However, no two children go through these stages in exactly the same manner. By regarding each child as a unique individual, teachers have the ability to customize learning opportunities to a specific child, moving that child along his/her unique developmental path. For example, a classroom of four-year-olds will not master the same literacy skills at the same pace throughout the school year. An intentional teacher works individually with the children to scaffold each child to the next level. “What preschool teachers do to guide and promote learning needs to be based on what each child brings to the interaction cognitively, culturally, and developmentally” (National Academy of Sciences [NAS], 2000, p. 11). This attention to individuality supports DAP.

Adding to the uniqueness of each child is the child’s cultural background and family values. Some of the earliest learning a child experiences is through the direct teaching of the significant adults in the child’s life, often his/her parents and extended family (NAEYC, 2009). This cultural system of beliefs and values become part of who a child is and subconsciously drives a child’s daily decisions (NAEYC, 2009, Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). By taking the time to know a child’s family and understand his/her cultural values, educators are then able to make better decisions for instructing that child in the classroom. When children step out of the home and into a classroom setting, the way they interpret the world and how they interact with other adults and peers is driven by their social and cultural background (NAEYC, 2009). In order to follow DAP in the classroom, teachers must take a child’s cultural background and values into consideration.

Maintaining DAP in an early childhood classroom is ultimately driven by a sense of intentionality. Intentional teachers make every effort to know and follow DAP in the classroom. Epstein (2014) defines an intentional teacher one who “aims at clearly defined learning objectives for children, employs instructional strategies likely to help children achieve the objectives, and continually assesses progress and adjust the strategies based on that assessment” (p. 5). Intentional teachers can explain the “why” behind what they are doing in the classroom (Epstein, 2014). These teachers also utilize materials and activities that address the interests of the children in the class, support children’s current skills while challenging them to scaffold those skills to the next level, plan for learning across all domains, and respect the children (Epstein, 2014).

Developmentally appropriate practices in an early childhood classroom are attainable when given the time, attention, and effort by intentional teachers.

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