Developmentally Appropriate Practice

in Early Childhood Programs

Serving Children from Birth through Age 8

Third Edition

Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp, editors

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Developmentally appropriate practice is at the core of being an excellent early childhood professional—that is the central premise of this book. Developmentally appropriate practice is grounded in the research on child development and learning and in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness. From this knowledge base, we know a great deal about how children develop and learn at various ages and what approaches and conditions tend to work best for them.

This knowledge is the starting place for teachers in the many decisions they make—the long-term ones as well as the minute-by-minute ones: how to organize the environment to help children do their best, how to plan curriculum that engages children and helps them reach important goals, how to adapt teaching strategies for the group and for individual children—the list goes on and on. But to the question “Is this decision developmentally appropriate?” the response always begins with two words: “It depends.” That is, whether a given teaching practice or policy is developmentally appropriate depends: for which child or children? . . . for which families? . . . in what context? . . . for what purpose?

This chapter describes what excellent teachers decide to do in their classrooms to translate the developmentally appropriate practice framework, outlined in the position statement, into high-quality experiences for children, birth to age 8.

To be an excellent teacher means . . .

**being intentional**

Whenever you see a great classroom, one in which children are learning and thriving, you can be sure that the teachers (and the administrators who support them) are highly intentional. In everything that good teachers do—
creating the environment, considering the curriculum and tailoring it to the children as individuals, planning learning experiences, and interacting with children and families—they are purposeful and thoughtful. As they make myriad decisions, big and small, they keep in mind the outcomes they seek. Even in responding to unexpected opportunities—“teachable moments”—intentional teachers are guided by the outcomes the program is trying to help children reach and by their knowledge of child development and learning.

Having a clear sense of how all aspects of the program relate to and promote the desired goals contributes to an intentional teacher’s effectiveness. Learning goals are usually identified for groups of children within a given age span. But teachers must determine where each child is in relation to a goal and adjust their teaching accordingly. For example, some children from poverty backgrounds are behind what is typical for other children in their age group in such areas as vocabulary, math and literacy learning, and self-regulation. For these children, excellent teachers, schools, and programs provide more extended, enriched, and intensive learning opportunities—such as more small-group activities and one-on-one interaction—to accelerate their learning and help them to catch up.

Similarly, in serving children with disabilities and other special needs, teachers’ attention to individual variation is essential. In addition to age-appropriate goals, an individualized plan for such a child will identify individually appropriate goals, which teachers implement in conjunction with families and specialists. In many cases, the plan necessitates more systematic, intentional teaching for the child to function and learn well in an inclusive setting.

Having their objectives 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 their purposes.

**Excellence in all areas of practice**

Excellent teachers are intentional in all aspects of their role. The position statement identifies these areas as: creating a caring community of learners, teaching to enhance development and learning, planning curriculum to achieve important goals, assessing children’s development and learning, and establishing reciprocal relationships with families.

The various facets of the teacher’s role are blended into a whole, which is illustrated here as a five-pointed star. Each point of the star represents one vital part of what teachers and early childhood programs must do to promote children’s learning and development and enable them to reach important goals. Clearly, these five facets are closely interrelated, and none can be left out or shortchanged without seriously weakening the whole.
To be an excellent teacher means . . .

creating a caring community of learners

Children learn and develop best when they are part of a community of learners—a community in which all participants consider and contribute to one another’s well-being and learning. To create such a classroom community, good teachers make a point of getting to know every child and family well. They make the effort to learn about each child’s personality, abilities, interests, and ways of learning, and they work to build a strong sense of group identity among the children in the group.

Toward this end, teachers plan ways for children to work and play together collaboratively, and they work to bring each child’s home culture and language into the shared culture of the class. They make a point of including children with special needs in all aspects of the program, so that not only do these children benefit but all the children in the group gain an understanding of how all people are similar and different. Inclusion of children with disabilities and other special needs means more than their simply being present in the classroom; it means, rather, they are active participants as part of the classroom community.

The excellent teacher makes it a priority to develop a warm, positive relationship with each child. This relationship is vital to young children’s learning and development in all areas, and it makes effective, positive guidance possible. In the early childhood years, guidance should not be just something teachers do so they can get on with the curriculum. Instead, children’s self-regulation and social and emotional competence are essential curricular goals in their own right. These capabilities do in fact help children to learn and succeed in school (McClelland, Acock, & Morrison 2006; Hyson 2008). Equally important, they have great intrinsic value for children’s present and future lives.

Guidance is effective when teachers help children learn how to make better decisions the next time. Excellent early childhood teachers recognize children’s conflicts and “misbehavior” as learning opportunities. Hence, they listen carefully to what children say, model problem solving, and give patient
reminders of rules (and reasons for them)—this, too, is effective guidance. A caring community of learners provides young children with a foundation that they will carry with them into their future lives in and out of school.

To be an excellent teacher means . . .

**teaching to enhance development and learning**

Good teachers continually use their knowledge and judgment to make intentional decisions about which materials, interactions, and learning experiences are likely to be most effective for the group and for each individual child in it. Many different teaching approaches and strategies have value in the early childhood classroom.

**Excellent teachers use a wide range of teaching strategies**

An effective teacher makes use of the strategy that fits a particular situation and the purpose or purposes she has in mind. She considers what the child or children already know and can do and the learning goals for the specific situation. Often she may try one strategy, see that it doesn’t work, and then try something else. She has a variety of strategies at the ready and remains flexible and observant so that she can determine which to use. Here are some of the strategies excellent teachers have at their disposal:

- Teachers **acknowledge** what children do or say. They let children know that they have noticed by giving children positive attention, sometimes through comments, sometimes through just sitting nearby and observing (“Thanks for your help, Kavi,” “You found another way to show 5”).

- Teachers **encourage** persistence and effort rather than just praising and evaluating what the child has done (“You’re thinking of lots of words to describe the dog in the story—let’s keep going!”).

- Teachers **give specific feedback** rather than general comments (“The beanbag didn’t get all the way to the hoop, James, so you might try throwing it harder”).

- Teachers **model** attitudes, ways of approaching problems, and behavior toward others, showing children rather than just telling them (“Hmm, that didn’t work and I need to think about why,” “I’m sorry, Ben, I missed part of what you said. Please tell me again”).

- Teachers **demonstrate** when they show the correct way to do something. This usually applies to a procedure that needs to be done in a certain way (e.g., using a wire whisk, writing a letter P).

- Teachers **create or add challenge** so that a task goes a bit beyond what the children can already do. (For example, when the teacher removes several chips from a set, asks how many are left, and finds the children can count the remaining chips accurately, he may then add difficulty by hiding the remaining chips. Figuring out how many are left just from knowing the number that were removed is more challenging.) In other cases, teachers **reduce challenge** to meet children where they are (e.g., by simplifying the task).