

Have you ever watched someone who seems to work “magic” with groups of small children? The activities seem to flow, with all the children happy, active and busy. Materials are used creatively and interesting ideas and helpful guidance seem to appear effortlessly. As with all magic tricks, however, what you don’t see is the time and energy that is put in to learning, planning and practicing. In order to work successfully with children, it is necessary to learn what goes into making an early childhood environment “magical.”

Good environments for children are **inclusive**. This means that activities and materials are flexible and geared to the individual needs and abilities of each child. Good early childhood environments are also **developmentally appropriate**. Developmentally appropriate settings are those in which materials, activities and interactions are appropriate for each child’s **developmental level**, regardless of the child’s chronological age. **Appropriate** means that the materials and activities offered to children provide opportunities to practice existing skills and to build new skills. A developmentally appropriate environment allows all children opportunities to be successful, yet challenged.

Young children learn by doing. They need to touch, move, push, pull, taste, smell and listen to develop understanding. Children are like scientists or explorers; they are actively engaged in learning everything possible about the world around them. In a developmentally appropriate setting, materials and activities are selected on the basis of individual children’s needs and interests, rather than on the basis of an adult-selected curriculum. A curriculum based on the children’s needs and interests—often referred to as an individualized curriculum—will capture the children’s interest and foster learning.

When you individualize your activities, many “teachable moments” will occur. For example, when a child visits the dentist for the first time, or when a family in your child care has a new baby, you have a wonderful learning opportunity for all the children. These events can become the themes for dramatic play. You can select books that address these topics. When new plants come up in the spring, you can introduce a science experiment. When the mail arrives, you can talk about the many jobs that people in the community have. Watch children’s activities and listen to their conversations and questions for clues to their interests and needs. A program based on children’s interests and needs is certain to be a successful program.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Developmentally appropriate practice—or DAP—is based on knowledge about how children develop and learn. With this knowledge, you can make good decisions about the materials and activities that you provide to children in your care.

How Children Develop and Learn:

1. All areas of children's development—physical, intellectual, social and emotional—are closely related. Development in one area influences and is influenced by development in other areas. For example, a child who is learning to talk (intellectual) is better able to interact with other children (social), which in turn helps a child build greater language skill.
2. Development occurs in a relatively orderly sequence, with later abilities, skills and knowledge building on those already acquired. A child cannot run before he/she can walk.
3. Development happens at different rates from child to child, as well as unevenly within different areas of each individual child's development. Not all typically developing children are able to walk by 1-year of age. A certain child might be able to walk by 9-months but might have trouble controlling the small muscles of the hand until age four.
4. Early experiences influence a child's continuing development. Optimal periods exist for certain types of learning and development. For example, there is good research to indicate that a child who does not hear spoken language in the first year or two of life will have great difficulty developing the ability to speak.
5. Development occurs in predictable patterns, from less complex to more complex. A 6-month old can make simple consonant sounds, such as "B" or "P." By 2-years of age, the same child can speak in 2-3 word sentences and by school age, that child can tell a complicated story.
6. Development and learning are influenced by a child's social and cultural environment. For example, children who grow up in homes where books are read and parents like to read, are likely to be readers themselves.
7. Children are active learners. They construct their own understanding of the world around them through direct experiences and interactions with the people and things in their environment. For example, a child who is allowed to play freely with blocks will learn first-hand about balance, weight, gravity, and so on. No one needs to tell the child about these things---he/she KNOWS!
8. Development and learning result from interaction between a child's biological makeup and the environment. A child might be born with the genetic potential to be 6-feet tall, but because of environmental factors such as poor nutrition or disease, that child might grow to be much shorter.
9. Play is an important vehicle for children's social, emotional and mental development. Children learn by doing; in play children experiment and try new things naturally. No one has to make the child learn, it simply happens. This is what is meant by the expression, "Play is a child's work."
10. Development advances when children have opportunities to practice newly acquired skills as well as when they experience a challenge just beyond the level of their present mastery. Children, like adults, need to practice skills over and over before they can do something effortlessly. They also need to be challenged to try

new things and to take some risks, to move beyond the things they can already do well and learn something new.

11. Children have individual styles of learning and knowing. Some children are very active, others like to talk and talk. Everybody is different, with different strengths and abilities.
12. Children learn and develop best in environments where they are safe and valued, their physical needs are met and they feel secure. Obviously, children who are happy, healthy and well cared for are better able to turn their attention to learning about the world. Children and adults who are hungry, ill or frightened are not able to focus their attention on learning or on taking risk—their lives are already risky enough.

Source: Adapted from Bredekamp, S. and Copple, C., ED. 1997. Developmentally appropriate practices in early childhood programs: Revised editon. NAEYC: Washington, DC