A look at DAP in the real world

Recognizing the Essentials of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

by Marjorie J. Kostelnik, PhD

A group of four year olds have been in circle time for 40 minutes. — not DAP

Aiysha wants the easel all to herself. LaToya wants a turn. The provider helps the girls develop a time table for sharing over the next several minutes. — DAP

Carlos, a kindergartner in an after school program, laboriously copies a series of words onto lined paper. — not DAP

Taken at face value, it seems easy to determine whether or not the preceding child care situations reflect developmentally appropriate practices. Closer scrutiny, however, may prompt us to reassess our original judgments.

For instance, we might revise our opinion about the circle time upon learning that the children are enthralled by a storyteller who actively involves them in the storytelling process and who has prolonged the group in response to the children's requests to "tell us another one." Likewise, helping children to share is usually a worthy endeavor. But, in this case, Aiysha only recently became a big sister and is having to share many things for the first time — attention at home, her room, and most of her things. Knowing this, we might determine that making her share the easel on this occasion is unnecessarily stressful. Helping LaToya find an alternate activity that will satisfy her desire to paint could be a better course of action for now. A second look at Carlos reveals that he is working hard to copy the words "happy birthday" for a present he is making for his mom. He is using a model created by another child and is writing on paper he selected himself. Within this context, it no longer seems so questionable for Carlos to be engaged in copy work.

Scenarios such as these illustrate that figuring out what does or does not constitute developmentally appropriate practice requires more than simply memorizing a particular set of do's and don'ts. It involves looking at every practice in context and making judgments about each child and the environment in which he or she is functioning.

Judgments Related to DAP

The guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice put forward by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and later corroborated and embellished by organizations such as the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) and the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) provide an excellent resource for thinking about, planning, and implementing high quality programs for young children. They serve to inform our decision making and to give us a basis for continually scrutinizing our professional practices.

Yet, regardless of how well they are developed, no one set of guidelines can tell us everything there is to know about early childhood education. Neither can they be applied unthinkingly. Every day practitioners find themselves in situations in which they must make judgments about what to value and what to do. Some of these situations demand on-the-spot decision making; others allow time for longer deliberation. Some involve relatively minor incidents; others are much more serious. Some require making major changes in the environment or in

one's teaching behavior; others necessitate only minimal changes or none at all. Yet, hurried or meticulously planned, small or large, involving more or less action, practitioners continually have to decide whether or not their actions and programs enhance or detract from the quality of children's lives.

Confusion Over DAP

Spokespersons for NAEYC, NASB, and NAESP have tried to underscore the evolving nature of developmentally appropriate practice and the contextual nature of its application. Unfortunately, some people eager for quick answers or a finite set of rules for working with young children have overgeneralized the guidelines. Suggested alternatives have become ironclad rules — issues of "more and less" have become "all or none." A number of erroneous assumptions have also arisen about DAP. Some of these include:

• There is only one right way to carry out a developmentally appropriate program.

• Developmentally appropriate programs are unstructured ones in which practitioners offer minimal guidance, if any at all, to the children in their care.

• In developmentally appropriate programs the expectations for children's behavior and learning are low.

• Developmentally appropriate practices cannot be adapted to meet the needs of particular culture groups or children of varying socio-economic backgrounds.

• Developmentally appropriate practice can be achieved simply by acquiring certain kinds of toys.

Assertions such as these have fueled a growing debate about the meaning, usefulness, and unitary nature of DAP. The resulting examination and exchange of views is healthy for the field, but it has also led some child care administrators to feel confused about what developmentally appropriate practice really is and how to achieve it. In addition, some directors are unsure which elements of developmentally appropriate practice are the most critical or where to begin in operationalizing the concept in their programs.

All of this uncertainty is compounded by the fact that every child care staff is comprised of people whose familiarity and experience with developmentally appropriate practices vary. Furthermore, some staff members may question whether certain of the practices espoused in written documents are sensitive to the unique needs of the population with whom they work. Others may feel overwhelmed at the thought of memorizing a long list of guidelines. Still others may not see an item on the list that addresses a particular situation with which they must cope. Many of these concerns arise from a preoccupation with the details of developmentally appropriate practice rather than with its essence. That essence lies in three principles common to every major interpretation of DAP suggested thus far.

The Essence of DAP

1. Developmentally appropriate means taking into account everything we know about how children develop and learn and matching that to the content and strategies planned for them in early childhood programs.

2. Developmentally appropriate means treating children as individuals, not as a cohort group.

3. Developmentally appropriate means treating children with respect — recognizing children's changing capabilities and having faith in their capacity to develop and learn.

In other words, we must first think about what children are like and then create activities, routines, and expectations that accommodate and complement those characteristics. In addition, we must know more than a few descriptive facts about a child, such as age and gender, to design appropriate programs. We have to look at children within the context of their family, culture, community, past experience, and current circumstances to create age-appropriate, as well as individually-appropriate, living and learning environments. Finally, we must recognize the unique ways in which children are children, not simply miniature adults. Experiences and expectations planned for children should reflect the notion that early childhood is a time of life qualitatively different from the later school years and adulthood.

Although each of us may interpret these basic tenets in slightly different ways, they provide a common foundation for defining high quality early childhood programs. Such programs are ones in which children of all abilities, ages, races, cultures, creeds, socio-economic, and family lifestyle backgrounds feel lovable, valuable, and competent.

The Need for Knowledge

Having specialized knowledge about child development and learning is the cornerstone of professionalism in early childhood education. Such knowledge encompasses recognizing common developmental threads among all children as well as understanding significant variations across cultures. Interviews with child care providers and observations of their work with children consistently find that those who have such knowledge

are better equipped and more likely to engage in developmentally appropriate practices. Instead of treating their interactions with children as wholly intuitive, they bring factual information to bear on how they think about children and how they respond to them.

Understanding child development provides practitioners with insights into children's behavior and helps adults better grasp the context within which those actions occur. This expands providers' notions of what constitutes normal child behavior. As a result, they are more likely to accept typical variations among children as well as accurately recognize potential problems that may require specialized intervention. Familiarity with child development also offers clues to child care workers about the sequence in which activities might be presented to children and the degree of developmental readiness necessary for children to achieve particular goals.

Understanding how young children think and expand their concepts and skills is the key to creating appropriate physical environments for children, to determining appropriate adult/child interactions, and to developing activities and routines that support rather than undermine children's natural ways of learning.

Children As Individuals

Practitioners are called on daily to make decisions that require them to see each child as distinct from all others. The adult must weigh such variables as the child's age, what the child's current level of comprehension might be, and what experiences the child has had. Although ***age*** is not an absolute measure of a youngster's capabilities and understanding, it does serve as a guide for establishing appropriate expectations. For instance, knowing that preschoolers do not yet have a mature grasp of games with rules, child care workers would not consider a four year old who spins twice or peeks at the cards in a memory game as cheating. Nor would they require preschoolers to adhere to the rules of the game in the same way they might expect grade-schoolers to do.

The kinds of ***previous knowledge and skills*** a child brings to a situation should also be taken into account. Obviously, children with little or no exposure to a particular situation or skill would not be expected to perform at the same level of competence as children whose backlog of experience is greater. For instance, standards for dressing independently would be different for a three year old than those for a six year old, not only because of differences in maturity, but because the older child has had more practice.

Contextual factors also contribute to determining the developmental appropriateness of certain decisions. For example, under normal circumstances, Ms. Sanchez's goal is to foster independence among the children in her family child care home. Ordinarily, children are given the time to make their own decisions, to repeat a task in order to gain competence, and to do as much as possible for themselves. However, these goals and strategies have to be modified during a tornado drill. Under such circumstances, children have no choice about taking shelter, nor can they take their time dressing themselves. As a result, slow dressers get more direct assistance than is customarily provided.

Physical resources and available time affect judgments as well. This explains why a huge mud puddle on the playground could be viewed as a place to avoid or an area for exploration. Which judgment is made depends in part on what kind of clothing the children are wearing, whether soap and water is available for clean up, whether it is warm enough to go barefoot, and whether there is enough time for children to both play in the mud and get cleaned up before moving into the next part of the day.

The Function of Respect

Respect involves having faith in children's ability to eventually learn the information, behavior, and skills they will need to constructively function on their own. Thus, having respect for children implies believing that they are capable of changing their behavior and of making self-judgments. Caregivers manifest respect when they allow children to think for themselves, make decisions, work toward their own solutions, and communicate their ideas.

For instance, it is out of respect for children that child care workers allow them to make choices ranging from which activity to pursue to where to sit at the lunch table. For this reason, too, practitioners encourage toddlers to pour their own juice, preschoolers to become actively involved in clean up, and school-age children to help determine the activities for the day. Although any of these activities could be more efficiently and skillfully accomplished by adults, respect for children's increasing competence involves allowing them to experience the exhilaration of accomplishment. Similarly, adults who respect children know that self-control is an emerging skill that children achieve over time given adequate support and guidance. With this in mind, children's transgressions are handled as gaps in knowledge and skills, not as character flaws.

Applications

Each time child care workers are faced with having to determine to what extent their actions are congruent with developmentally appropriate practice, it is useful to ask the following questions:

• Is this practice in keeping with what I know about child development and learning?

• Does this practice take into account the children's individual needs?

• Does this practice demonstrate respect for children?

These queries can be used to address immediate concerns or to serve as the basis for long-term deliberations. They can stimulate individual thinking or consideration of program practices by an entire staff. Newcomers to the field use the preceding questions to hone their understanding of the fundamental nature of children. Seasoned veterans often go beyond the basics to consider the extent to which their practices take into account gender and cultural differences among children as well as differences related to socioeconomic status. In every circumstance, the answer to all three questions should be yes. If any answer is no, it is a strong sign that the practice should be reconsidered, revamped, or discarded. If there is uncertainty about a question in relation to a certain practice, that practice is worth examining further.

To illustrate the power of these essential principles as tools for meaningful reflection, take a moment to consider the first question above. In my own experience, I have started the reflective process by asking child care workers to describe the children with whom they work (focusing on how they believe those youngsters develop and learn). Often practitioners use adjectives such as active, curious, talkative, or playful. The procedure of generating descriptive words often leads to thought-provoking discussions to which both experienced and less experienced members contribute. If people decide they aren't sure about some items (e.g., What do children really learn from play? Do children from varied backgrounds develop and learn in the same way?), their questions serve as the impetus for staff research or the basis for additional in-service training. Next, we create a chart to examine what implications such characteristics have for program practice. This is accomplished by listing child development and learning traits in one column and corresponding practices that support or match those traits in a second column. A typical example is offered below.

A chart such as the one illustrated here serves two major functions. First, the people who create it become increasingly invested in the practices they identify. These are likely to be ones they take care to address in the future because they can see the logic of such strategies in

Child Traits	Child Care Practices
Children are active learners.	**The child care teacher:** gives children opportunities for gross motor activities each day. includes a daily free-choice period during which children can move freely. creates a schedule in which quiet, inactive times are followed by longer, more active periods. keeps inactive segments of the day short.
Children are curious.	**The child care teacher:** builds activities around children's interests. provides many chances for children to explore materials and concepts. encourages children to pose problems and investigate solutions.
Children are playful.	**The child care teacher:** integrates play throughout the day. provides children with a variety of props and other manipulative objects. encourages children to create and use their own ideas within their play. creates a classroom design and schedule that allows children to move about freely. monitors and enhances children's play as an observer or as a participant. evaluates the sound and activity level within the program in terms of the quality of children's play — recognizes that high quality play is often noisy and active.

relation to children they know and care about. Second, their ideas can be compared to those in published documents. As practitioners make such comparisons, they find many similarities between their ideas and those of experts in the field. This contributes to greater staff confidence and helps to make the NAEYC guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice more personally meaningful.

Summary

Ultimately, for DAP to have a major impact on the early childhood profession, people must see the principles which undergird it as extensions of their own values. These shared values will be what make DAP an integral part of our thoughts and actions rather than just a fad soon to be replaced by another. In addition, fundamental values such as these are likely to remain constant, even as the strategies we use to address them differ from one circumstance to another or change over time. Supporting child care workers as they examine the essentials of developmentally appropriate practice is not only an important administrative responsibility, it is one that promises to yield lasting rewards for staff and for children.

Marjorie J. Kostelnik, PhD, is a professor in the Department of Family and Child Ecology at Michigan State University and is the program supervisor of the Child Development Laboratories on campus. A former child care, Head Start, and nursery school teacher, she has been actively involved in helping a variety of early childhood programs explore the implications of developmentally appropriate practice and translate their understandings into action.