naeyc® National Association for the Education of Young Children

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Pre-K and K

An Introductory Checklist for Principals and Program Administrators

20 DAP Practices to Look For

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) supports young children's learning, growth, and well-being through play, relationships, strengths-based teaching, and meaningful experiences. A developmentally appropriate pre-K or K classroom does not look like a classroom for older children, with students sitting at desks. Most of the curriculum is implemented through active learning experiences. The classroom isn't quiet. Young children's learning involves play, conversations, and hands-on explorations. Teachers use a variety of methods, and while children will experience some whole group instruction, most of the learning will take place in small groups.

This introductory checklist has been culled from hundreds of practices found within the fourth edition of NAEYC's book *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8*. It highlights what educators should do and practices they should avoid. **Please note:** This checklist is not an assessment; rather, it is guidance for principals and program administrators on what to look for in high-quality early learning settings to inform their classroom observations, coaching conversations, and reflective planning.

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Area	What Educators Should Do	Practices to Avoid	Observation and Coaching Notes
1. Classroom organization	• Offer a variety of learning centers with options for engagement (e.g., blocks; dramatic play; art; books, math manipulatives, games, science and nature materials (may include a sand/water area), and writing supplies. • Design classroom environments, materials, and activities to support learning through play as well as through multiple modalities (e.g., visual, auditory, kinesthetic, tactile).	• Arranging the classroom with desks or tables only, without centers or interest areas for hands-on engagement. • Leaving spaces unchanged over weeks or months. • Not offering enough materials or space for children's exploration and play.	
2. Scheduling play integrated with intentional learning goals	• Establish a daily schedule that reflects curriculum planning integrating play with learning goals. • Organize the schedule with extended blocks of time for child-directed, teacher-facilitated, and guided play, with flexibility to support the	• Overscheduling or rigidly structuring time so children become tired or overstimulated. • Ending activities when children are deeply engaged without giving them time to return to or complete a project.	

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	skill, focus, and activity levels of children. • Offer children choice of which centers to explore. • Ensure children with disabilities are included in social relationships, play, and learning experiences. Model and provide support where needed.	• Making play-based materials and centers available only as filler (e.g., offering these only at the end of the day if all work is completed or only on Fridays as a reward).	
3. Learning formats	• Plan individual, small group, large group, and interactive play activities and respond to children's focus and engagement. • Adjust in response to children's level of focus, engagement, skill level, and need for support.	• Assigning children to groups that are rigid. • Expecting all children to complete the same activities. • Relying on one format (e.g., whole group) for most or all of the instruction.	
4. Supporting children's interests	• Learn about children's interests, activities, and cultures, and follow up with materials and activities to extend learning. • Connect new words and ideas to experiences	• Adhering strictly to a preset plan for introducing ideas.	

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	children know and understand.		
5. Responsive schedules	• Establish a predictable sequence of daily events, including arrival and departure, outdoor play, and mealtimes, while remaining sensitive and flexible to meet individual children's needs. • Minimize transitions and waiting times by having activities and materials for upcoming activities prepared ahead of time. • Attend to children's needs (e.g., toileting) flexibly.	• Not building in care routines (e.g., bathroom breaks, handwashing, optional rest). • Expecting children to follow a rigid, inflexible schedule rather than adapting to individual needs. • Not recognizing routines as important learning times for social, cognitive, and personal skills.	
6. Learning standards	• Use their state's early learning standards to set challenging yet achievable goals. • Integrate all the standards into curriculum planning as well as opportunities to build on children's background knowledge and experiences and to	• Setting goals without considering their state's early learning standards or families' perspectives. • Focusing only on a subset of standards (e.g., math, literacy). • Not setting learning goals for individual children.	

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	reflect families' perspectives. • Plan interdisciplinary learning across multiple domains through play, learning activities, and other learning experiences so children develop an understanding of concepts and make connections across disciplines (e.g., draw children's attention to the way math is used to solve a problem in science; explore the way patterns in nature are related to music and art).	• Seeing learning as something that only occurs in separated content areas. • Teaching topics in fragmented time segments so that children are less likely to generalize ideas and apply them across content areas.	
7. The arts	• Provide daily opportunities to explore a range of creative and open-ended art materials and tools to create two- and three-dimensional products. • Foster creative and divergent thinking, aesthetic engagement, and cultural appreciation	• Viewing the arts as less important than content learning rather than a way for children to express their ideas and creativity and to learn about others.	

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	through the art making, music, and dance.		
8. Caring community	• Prioritize building a relationship with each child (e.g., greeting children and families at arrival; getting on children's level when interacting; having frequent, extended one-on-one conversations with children; acknowledging children's efforts and accomplishments).	• Focusing on maintaining classroom control. • Emphasizing the group over understanding children as individuals.	
9. Strengths-based approach	• Use strengths-based language with and about children. • Build on children's capabilities and emerging strengths across domains and content areas, including social, emotional, and behavior development. For example, when talking with families, describe a behavioral challenge as an opportunity to learn skills instead of a problem.	• Talking with colleagues and families about children's challenges in negative ways, including talking about behaviors when children and others are present (e.g., saying to a coteacher, "Tara is wild—she's all over the place"; saying to a parent, "Joaquim doesn't try to follow instructions" instead of "We are working with Joaquim to help him get started on tasks").	

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	When a child exhibits a challenging behavior, ask the child "How can I help?" instead of "What is wrong?"). • Understand the importance of acknowledging and encouraging children's efforts.		
10. Effective teaching strategies with multilingual learners	• Model rich language and teach new vocabulary within meaningful contexts. • Support vocabulary development for multilingual learners by modeling word meanings (e.g., using familiar stories, gestures, objects, and images that children understand). • Integrate the child's home language into learning activities and encourage families to maintain their home languages.	• Expecting multilingual learners to follow the same language acquisition timeline as monolingual children. • Expecting multilingual children to catch on to expectations without intentional scaffolding.	
11. Differentiation	• Scaffold children's learning through the environment, materials,	• Providing too much or too little scaffolding.	

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	and teaching strategies. • Assist and/or add supports to enable each child to master a challenge just beyond the child's current level, then gradually reduce this support as the child is able to proceed independently. • Focus on the strengths of children with disabilities, both to help them accomplish their individual goals and to help them make progress in the general curriculum.	• Failing to check where children are at the outset and/or failing to vary the support given based on a child's needs.	
12. Assessment	• Make careful choices about how and when to assess children, keeping in mind children's individual development, languages, cultures, and experiences. • Use a variety of assessment methods (e.g., observation notes, work samples, anecdotal records) to gain a more	• Neglecting to assess children or relying on a limited range of assessments modalities and skills assessed. • Conducting assessment processes without a plan for what to assess and how to use results. • Not considering how a child's unique experiences, culture, and	

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	complete picture of children's development. • Consider each child's strengths, needs, and interests to determine next steps to support their learning and development.	language might influence the assessment process.	
13. Language development	• Foster vocabulary and knowledge development by using descriptive and specific words and doing so throughout the day during a range of activities (e.g., conversations at snack time, at circle time, during transitions). • Plan specific vocabulary with questions to build and extend language and to engage children in sustained conversations. • Ask children to share ideas and personal experiences to promote confidence and self-expression.	• Asking closed-ended questions or talking with children only to direct behavior, explain activities, and give information.	
14. Literacy-rich environment	• Provide high-quality books and other types of	• Overlooking reading areas that are	

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	text, including informational texts, in an inviting library area with comfortable, soft seating as well as in different play areas.	disorganized or books that are not regularly rotated or in good condition. • Displaying books randomly so children cannot find those of interest.	
15. Literacy skills	• Introduce phonological awareness skills, with a particular focus on phonemic awareness and other emergent literacy skills, by using songs, poems, books, word games, and predictable books. • Draw children's attention to print conventions and to letters and their sounds (i.e., phonics). • Support writing development by providing opportunities for children to make independent guided choices with writing materials and experiences.	• Drilling literacy skills with the use of flashcards and more passive engagement from children. • Giving little attention to promoting phonological awareness, print awareness, sound-letter connections, and/or writing development throughout the day.	
16. Math skills	• Apply math concepts such as counting,	• Facilitating rote counting and repetition without	

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	operations, and geometry during play and throughout the day (e.g., asking "How many more plates do we need for lunch?"). • Plan ways to incorporate math language during play (e.g., helping children compare and discuss attributes and patterns and describe similarities and differences).	helping children understand and make connections between written numbers and their meaning. • Focusing on math skills disconnected from children's experiences (e.g., limited math story problems, counting or adding/subtracting without any meaningful context).	
17. STEM inquiry	• Provide a variety of manipulatives, puzzles, and open-ended STEM materials in play and learning centers. • Encourage children to experiment, evaluate, classify, compare, sort, construct, and create with materials to test their hypotheses and extend new knowledge.	• Offering only limited opportunities for hands-on exploration and discovery.	
18. Social and emotional	• Infuse into the curriculum ways to help children recognize, label, express, and regulate emotions (e.g., model	• Expecting children to handle social situations independently.	

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	language about feelings, integrate moments such as asking a friend how they are doing). • Plan conversations about situations and stories that involve solving problems by helping, negotiating, listening, and sharing ideas. • Manage social issues, such as a child wanting to work in an area that's already occupied, as they occur.		
19. Motor development (gross and fine motor)	• Provide recess daily, with alternate indoor gross motor space and equipment when weather does not permit outdoor play. • Encourage vigorous exercise and physical skills, such as • catching, balancing, running, jumping, and climbing. • Provide a range of fine motor materials of varying sizes that offer	• Removing or limiting recess without providing alternate physical activity spaces indoors when weather does not permit outdoor play. • Presenting materials that challenge a limited range of fine motor skills. • Overlooking children who need modifications to use some materials and equipment.	

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	different types of manipulation (e.g., writing tools, scissors, puzzles, board and card games, interlocking blocks, playdough, beads, other loose parts).		
20. Reflecting diversity	• Create a classroom that reflects the diversity of the community and society. • Involve every child's home culture and language in the shared culture of the group, promoting children's positive self-identities. • Provide multicultural and multiethnic books, music, toys, videos, movies, and posters that reflect and represent the children and their families. Include materials that portray people with differing abilities and gender identities.	• Creating environments that reflect some children, families, or communities while ignoring or underrepresenting others (e.g., using photos and books that primarily represent one type of child, one type of family, one type of home, one type of transportation, one type of neighborhood). • Choosing materials that reinforce stereotypes.	

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When Are Coaching Conversations Needed?

When principals and program administrators observe

- Extended direct instruction, sitting and/or waiting for children, or whole group instruction with limited child engagement
- Use of worksheets or isolated skill drills as the main tool for or evidence of learning
- That little time is provided for play, movement, outdoor exploration, conversation, art, music, or choice
- Materials or displays do not reflect children's families, languages, cultures, communities, identities, or abilities
- That challenging behavior is addressed through compliance or exclusion rather than self-regulation and relationship skills
- Assessment methods that overemphasize testing or ignore observation, play, language, culture, ability, or developmental variation

Coaching Prompts

- How are children learning through play, inquiry, conversation, relationships, and hands-on work?
- Where are educators intentionally extending learning?
- What supports would make classrooms more joyful, equitable, responsive, and rigorous?

NAEYC's Key DAP Resources

For a deeper understanding of DAP and more comprehensive examples of what to look for, we hope you will explore NAEYC's DAP books, position statements, classroom examples, reflection questions, and related offerings as sources for professional development in your district. The following NAEYC resources will help you develop communities of practice, trainings, and professional development in your school or district. Use the QR code to find out more about these DAP resources.

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"Developmentally Appropriate Practice" Position Statement

The fourth edition of the "Developmentally Appropriate Practice" position statement describes a set of evidence-based core considerations and principles of child development and learning. In addition to identifying guidelines for early childhood educators, the statement makes recommendations for policies. DAP also recognizes the multiple tensions in current research, practice, and systems that need to be addressed for each child to achieve their full potential.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8, Fourth Edition

This comprehensive book provides a thorough discussion of the core considerations, principles, and guidelines that inform educators' decision making. You'll find extensive examples of effective approaches for teaching children across the early childhood spectrum as well as specific examples for infants and toddlers, preschoolers, kindergartners, and children in the primary grades. The book includes thought questions, learning goals, classroom examples, and vignettes to inform professional development, trainings, and college courses.

DAP Book Study Guide

This downloadable PDF offers thought questions and activities to guide using the core book as a professional development tool, for a book study, or within a community of practice.

Focus on Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Equitable and Joyful Learning in Preschool

This practitioner-focused book offers an introduction to developmentally appropriate practice with a focus on preschool. It includes thought questions and classroom implementation examples.

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Focus on Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Equitable and Joyful Learning in Kindergarten

This practitioner-focused book offers an introduction to developmentally appropriate practice with a focus on kindergarten. It includes thought questions and classroom implementation examples.

Focus on DAP in Kindergarten Book Study Guide

This downloadable PDF offers thought questions and activities to guide using the book as a professional development tool, for a book study, or within a community of practice.

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