

# NAEYC Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice: 2020

## **NAEYC Position Statement**

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## *Table of Contents*

### Contents

Purpose .....	3
Statement of the position .....	4
Defining developmentally appropriate practice (DAP).....	4
Core considerations to inform decision making .....	5
Principles of child development and learning and implications for practice .....	7
Guidelines for DAP in action: Using knowledge of child development and learning in context .....	15
1. Creating a caring community of learners.....	15
2. Engaging in reciprocal partnerships with families and fostering community connections.....	18
3. Observing, documenting, and assessing children’s development and learning.....	19
4. Teaching to enhance each child’s development and learning.....	21
5. Planning and implementing an engaging curriculum to achieve meaningful goals .....	25
6. Demonstrating professionalism as an early childhood educator .....	28
Recommendations for implementing DAP .....	30
1. Recommendations for schools, family child care homes, and other program settings .....	30
2. Recommendations for higher education and adult development .....	31
3. Recommendations for policymakers .....	31
4. Recommendations for research.....	32
Conclusion.....	33
Appendix: History and context .....	34
Reframing “best” practice.....	35
Continuity and change in this revision.....	35
Endnotes .....	37

## Purpose

Early childhood educators have a professional responsibility to plan and implement intentional, developmentally appropriate learning experiences that promote the social and emotional development, physical development and health, cognitive development, and general learning competencies of each child served.<sup>1</sup> But what does it mean to be “developmentally appropriate”? This position statement, one of five foundational documents developed by NAEYC in collaboration with the early childhood profession to advance high-quality early learning for all young children, defines the term. The definition emerges from a set of evidence-based core considerations and principles of child development and learning, all of which are explained in the principles section of this statement. To support educators’ use of developmentally appropriate practice, this statement also identifies guidelines for decision making in five key areas of

responsibility that correspond to the **Professional Standards and Competencies** for Early Childhood Educators ([link](#)).<sup>2</sup>

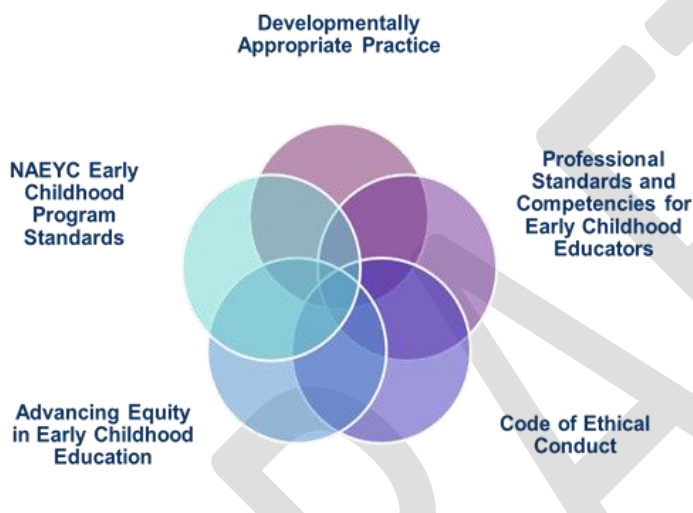


Figure 1. Foundational documents to advance early learning

This statement’s primary focus is on the decisions early childhood educators make that result in developmentally appropriate practice. It is important to note, however, that educators make these decisions within systems that include their specific program settings and extend to larger society. Developmentally appropriate decision making by early childhood educators is facilitated when these

systems also reflect the tenets described within this statement. Therefore, in addition to identifying guidelines for early childhood educators, the statement makes specific recommendations for policies and actions needed to support educators as they strive to implement developmentally appropriate practice—in their work settings, through professional preparation and development, in public policy, and through continuing research.

This is the fourth edition of NAEYC’s position statement on developmentally appropriate practice. (For a brief history and summary of changes from previous editions, see the appendix.) More extensively than in previous editions, the definition, core considerations, principles, guidelines, and recommendations all underscore the importance of social, cultural, and historical contexts. This broader view emphasizes the implications of contexts not only for each child but also for all the adults (educators, administrators, and others) involved in any aspect of early childhood education.

We begin this statement noting multiple inherent tensions:

- This position is based on a synthesis of current research and evidence across multiple disciplines. Yet research finds that culture and context matter, that relatively little research has been conducted with children from non-White and non-middle-class backgrounds, and that there is a

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need for additional research led by those who reflect the diversity of children and families and their lived experiences.

- This position requires well-prepared and qualified early childhood educators to engage in effective decision making. Yet insufficient funding and other policy decisions (for example, related to group size and ratios and mandated curricula and assessments that do not reflect the principles of learning and development identified here, among other factors) have resulted in inadequate compensation and working conditions that make it challenging for early childhood educators to implement these guidelines. In addition, educators need support from higher education and other professional development systems; they need to be consistently and effectively prepared and supported to reflect on and address their own inherent biases and to provide developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive learning experiences to an increasingly diverse population of children.
- This position highlights the importance of joyful learning experiences that are meaningful to each child and that provide active engagement through play, exploration, and inquiry in ways that support the whole child—socially, emotionally, physically, and academically. Yet such opportunities are too often denied to young children when educational practices are not responsive to their developmental, cultural, and linguistic characteristics.
- This position is based on NAEYC’s [core values and beliefs, which](#) underscore the fundamental right of each and every child to live in a society dedicated to helping them achieve their full potential. Yet the current inequitable distribution of societal power and privilege on the basis of race, gender, language, disability, and other social identities has limited opportunities and has harmed children—as well as early childhood professionals.<sup>3</sup>

Each of these tensions must be addressed for each child to achieve their full potential. We offer this statement as a call to action, committing to work collectively to address the ways in which current realities constrain the full potential of all young children as we continue to reflect and learn from multiple, diverse perspectives.

### Statement of the position

Each and every child, birth through age 8, has the right to equitable access to high-quality early childhood education programs—in centers, family child care homes, or schools—that fully support their optimal development and learning across all domains and content areas. Children are born eager to learn; they take delight exploring their world and making connections. The degree to which early learning programs support children’s delight and wonder in learning reflects the quality of that setting. Educators who engage in developmentally appropriate practice foster young children’s joyful learning and maximize the opportunities for each and every child to achieve their full potential.

### Defining developmentally appropriate practice

NAEYC defines “developmentally appropriate practice” as educational and caregiving methods that promote each child’s optimal learning and development through a strengths-based approach to joyful, engaged learning. Educators implement developmentally appropriate practice by recognizing the multiple assets all young children bring to the early learning program as unique individuals and as members of families and communities. Building on each child’s strengths—and taking care to not harm any aspect of each child’s physical, cognitive, social, or emotional well-being—educators design and implement learning settings to

help each child achieve their full potential across all domains of development and across all content areas. Developmentally appropriate practice recognizes and supports each individual as a valued member of the learning community. As a result, to be developmentally appropriate, practices must also be culturally, linguistically, and ability appropriate for each child.

## Core considerations to inform decision making

Developmentally appropriate practice requires early childhood educators to gain or seek out knowledge and understanding using three core considerations: **commonality** in children’s development and learning, **individuality** reflecting each child’s unique characteristics and experiences, and the **context** in which learning and development occur. These core considerations apply to all aspects of educators’ decision-making in their work to foster each child’s optimal development and learning.

### **1. Commonality—current research and understandings of processes of child development and learning that apply to all children, including the understanding that all development and learning occur within specific social, cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts**

An ever-increasing body of research documents the tremendous amount of learning and development that occur from birth through age 8 across all domains and content areas and how foundational this learning and development is for later life.<sup>4</sup> This extensive knowledge base, including both what is known about general processes of children’s development and learning and the educational practices educators need to fully support development and learning in all areas, is summarized in the principles section of this statement.

When considering commonalities in learning and development, it is important to acknowledge that much of the research and the principal theories that have historically guided early childhood professional preparation and practice have primarily reflected norms based on a dominant Western scientific-cultural model.<sup>5,6</sup> Little research has considered a normative perspective for other groups. As a result, differences from this Western (typically White, middle-class, monolingual English-speaking) norm have been viewed as deficits, helping to perpetuate systems of power and privilege and to maintain structural inequities.<sup>7,8</sup> Increasingly, theories once assumed to be universal in developmental sciences, such as attachment, are now recognized to vary by culture and experience.<sup>9</sup>

The current body of evidence indicates that all child development and learning—actually, all human development and learning—are always embedded within and affected by social and cultural contexts.<sup>10</sup> As social and cultural contexts vary, so too do processes of learning and development. Social and cultural aspects are not simply ingredients of development and learning; these aspects provide the framework for all development and learning. For example, play is a universal phenomenon across all cultures (it also extends to other primates). Play, however, can vary significantly by social and cultural contexts as children use play as a means of interpreting and making sense of their experiences.<sup>11</sup> Early childhood educators need to understand the commonalities of children’s development and learning and how those commonalities take unique forms as they reflect the social and cultural frameworks in which they occur.

### **2. Individuality—the characteristics and experiences unique to each child, within the context of their family and community, that have implications for how best to support their development and learning**

Early childhood educators have the responsibility of getting to know each child well, understanding each child as an individual and as a family and community member. Educators use a variety of methods—including reflecting on their knowledge of the community; seeking information from the family; observing

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the child; examining the child's work; and using authentic, valid, and reliable individual child assessments. Educators understand that each child reflects a complex mosaic of knowledge and experiences that contributes to the considerable diversity among any group of young children. These differences include the children's various social identities, interests, strengths, and preferences; their personalities, motivations, and approaches to learning; and their knowledge, skills, and abilities related to their cultural experiences, including family languages, dialects, and vernaculars. Children may have disabilities or other individual learning needs, including needs for accelerated learning. Sometimes these individual learning needs have been diagnosed, and sometimes they have not.

Early childhood educators recognize this diversity and the opportunities it offers to support *all* children's learning by recognizing each child as a unique individual with assets and strengths to contribute to the learning environment.

### **3. Context—everything discernible about the social and cultural contexts for each child, each educator, and the program as a whole**

One of the key updates in this revision is the expansion of the core consideration regarding the social and cultural contexts of development and learning. As noted in the first core consideration on commonality, the fact that development and learning are embedded in social and cultural contexts is true of all individuals. Context includes both one's personal cultural context (that is, the complex set of ways of knowing the world that reflect one's family and other primary caregivers and their traditions and values) and the broader multifaceted and intersecting (for example, social, racial, economic, historical, and political) cultural contexts in which each of us live. In both the narrower and broader definitions, these are dynamic rather than static contexts that shape and are shaped by individual members as well as other factors.

Understanding the context of each child's development and learning remains an important consideration for early childhood educators. In addition, early childhood educators must also be aware that they themselves—and their programs as a whole—bring their own experiences and contexts, in both the narrower and broader definitions, to their decision-making. This is particularly important to consider when educators do not share the cultural contexts of the children they serve. Even when educators appear to share the cultural contexts of children, they can sometimes feel disconnects between their professional and cultural knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

To fully support each child's optimal development and learning in an increasingly diverse society, early childhood educators need to understand the implications of these contexts. By recognizing that children's experiences may vary by their social identities (for example, by race/ethnicity, language, gender, class, ability/disability, family composition, and economic status, among others), with different and intersecting impacts on their development and learning, educators can make adaptations to affirm and support positive development of each child's multiple social identities. Additionally, educators must be aware of, and counter, their own and larger societal biases that may undermine a child's positive development and well-being. Because the professional knowledge base is evolving in this regard, early childhood educators must also be committed to continuing their professional development, including by learning from the families and communities they serve.

## Principles of child development and learning and implications for practice

NAEYC's guidelines and recommendations for developmentally appropriate practice are based on the following principles and their implications for early childhood professional practice. These principles reflect an extensive research base that is only partially referenced here.<sup>13</sup> Because these principles are interrelated, this linear list does not fully represent their overall complexity.

### **1. Learning and development are dynamic processes that reflect the complex interplay between a child's biological characteristics and their environment, each shaping the other as well as future patterns of growth.**

Advances in neuroscience over the last two decades have provided new insights regarding the processes of early brain development and their long-term implications for development and learning. The findings provide robust evidence supporting the importance of high-quality early learning experiences for young children for promoting children's lifelong success.

Neural connections—which are the basis for all thought, communication, and learning—are established most rapidly in early childhood.<sup>14</sup> The processes of forming new connections and pruning connections that are not used continue throughout a person's lifespan but are most consequential in the first three years.<sup>15</sup> When caregivers are sensitive and respond to an infant's babble, cry, or gesture, they directly support the development of neural connections that lay the foundation for children's communication and social skills, including self-regulation. These "serve and return" interactions shape the brain's architecture.<sup>16</sup> They also help caregivers "tune in" to the infant and better respond to the infant's wants and needs. When an infant's caregivers persistently fail to provide this type of responsive care, the infant experiences chronic stress that may negatively impact brain development and may delay or impair the development of essential systems and abilities, including thinking, learning, and memory, the immune system, and the ability to cope with stress.<sup>17</sup>

The interplay of biology and environment, present at birth, continues through the preschool years and primary grades. This has particular implications for children who experience adversity, such as living in persistent poverty, which can generate chronic stress that can negatively affect the development of brain areas associated with cognitive and self-regulatory functions.<sup>18</sup> Although children of all races can experience poverty and other adverse childhood experiences, Black and Hispanic children have been found to more likely experience adversity than White non-Hispanic or Asian non-Hispanic children,<sup>19</sup> reflecting a history of systemic inequities.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, racism is recognized for its long-term negative impact on children. The chronic stress created by racism can predispose individuals to chronic disease.<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that these stressors affect adults as well as children, including family members and early childhood educators themselves, who often earn poverty-level wages.

Some children appear to be more susceptible than others to the effects of environmental influence—both positive and negative—reflecting individual differences at play. For children facing adverse circumstances, including trauma, the buffering effects of caring, consistent relationships—with family and other community members but also in high-quality early childhood programs—are also important to note.<sup>22</sup> This emerging science emphasizes the critical importance of early childhood educators in providing consistent, responsive, sensitive care to promote children's development and learning across the full birth through age 8 period. The negative impacts of chronic stress and other adverse experiences can be overcome. High-quality early childhood education contributes substantially to children's resilience and healthy development.

**2. All domains of child development—physical development, cognitive development, social and emotional development, and linguistic development (including bilingual or multilingual development)—are important; each domain both supports and is supported by the others.**

Early childhood educators are responsible for fostering children’s development and learning in all these domains and in general learning competencies and executive functioning, which include attention, working memory, self-regulation, reasoning, problem solving, and approaches to learning. There is considerable overlap and interaction across these domains and competencies. For example, sound nutrition, physical activity, and sufficient sleep all promote children’s abilities to engage in social interactions that in turn stimulate cognitive growth. Children who experience predictable, responsive relationships and responsive interactions with adults also tend to demonstrate improved general learning competencies and executive functioning.<sup>23</sup>

Changes in one domain often impact other areas and highlight each area’s importance. For example, as children begin to crawl or walk, they gain new possibilities for exploring the world. This mobility in turn affects both their cognitive development and their ability to satisfy their curiosity, underscoring the importance of adaptations for children with disabilities that limit their mobility. Likewise, language development influences a child’s ability to participate in social interaction with adults and other children; such interactions, in turn, support further language development as well as further social, emotional, and cognitive development. Science is clear that children can learn multiple languages as easily as one, given adequate exposure and practice, and this process brings cognitive advantages.<sup>24</sup> In groups in which children speak different home languages, educators may not be able to speak each language, but they can value and support maintaining all languages.<sup>25</sup>

A growing body of work demonstrates relationships between social, emotional, and academic competencies<sup>26</sup> as well as the importance of movement and physical activity.<sup>27</sup> These domains are mutually reinforcing and are all critical in educating young children across the full birth through 8 age span. Intentional teaching strategies, including free play and guided play, address each domain. Kindergartens and the early elementary grades have increasingly prioritized cognitive learning. But integrating cognitive, emotional, social, and interpersonal skills and competencies better prepares children for more challenging academic content and learning experiences.<sup>28</sup> In brief, the knowledge base documents the importance of a comprehensive curriculum and the interrelatedness of the developmental domains for all young children’s well-being and success.

**3. Although general progressions of development and learning can be identified, variations due to cultural contexts, experiences, and individual differences must also be considered.**

A pervasive characteristic of development is that children’s functioning becomes increasingly complex—in language, cognition, social interaction, physical movement, problem solving, and virtually every other aspect. Increased organization and memory capacity of the developing brain make it possible for children to combine simple routines into more complex strategies with age.<sup>29</sup> Despite these predictable changes in all domains, the ways that these changes are demonstrated and the meanings attached to them will vary in different cultural and linguistic contexts. For example, in some cultures, children may be encouraged to satisfy their growing curiosity by moving independently to explore the environment; in other cultures, children may be socialized to seek answers to queries within structured activities created for them by adults.<sup>30</sup> In addition, all children learn language through their social interactions, but there are important distinctions in the process for monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual children.<sup>31</sup> Rather than assuming that



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the process typical of monolingual children is the norm against which others ought to be judged (as many researchers and educators previously thought), it is important for educators to recognize the differences as variations in strengths (rather than deficits) and to support them appropriately.<sup>32</sup>

Development and learning also occur at varying rates from child to child and at uneven rates across different areas for each child. Children’s demonstrated abilities and skills are often fluid and may vary from day to day based on individual or contextual factors. For example, because children are still developing the ability to direct their attention, a distraction in the environment may result in a child successfully completing a puzzle one day but not the next. In addition, some regression in observed skills is not uncommon before new developments are fully achieved.<sup>33</sup> For all of these reasons, the notion of “stages” of development has limited utility; a more helpful concept may be to think of waves of development that allow for considerable overlap without rigid boundaries.<sup>34</sup>

#### **4. Children are active learners from birth, constantly taking in and organizing information to create meaning through their relationships, their interactions with their environment, and their overall experiences.**

Even as infants, children are capable of highly complex thinking. Using information they gather through their interactions with people and things as well as their observations of the world around them, they quickly create sophisticated theories to build their conceptual understanding. They recognize patterns and make predictions that they then apply to new situations. Infants appear particularly attuned to adults as sources of information, underscoring the importance of consistent, responsive caregiving to support the formation of relationships.<sup>35</sup> Cultural variations can be seen in these interactions, with implications for later development and learning. For example, in some cultures, children are socialized to quietly observe members of the adult community and to learn by pitching in (often through mimicking the adults’ behaviors).<sup>36</sup> In other cultures, adults make a point of getting a child’s attention to encourage one-on-one interactions. Children socialized to learn through observing may quietly watch others without asking for help, while those socialized to expect direct interaction may find it difficult to maintain focus without frequent adult engagement.

Throughout the early childhood years, young children continue to construct knowledge and make meaning through their interactions with adults and peers, through active exploration and play, and through their observations of people and things in the world around them. Educators recognize the importance of their role in creating a rich learning environment that encourages the development of knowledge (including vocabulary) and skills across all domains. Educators understand that children’s current abilities are largely the result of the experiences—the opportunities to learn—that children have had. Children who are not as demonstrably advanced as their peers likely have just as much potential and capacity to learn; they need educators who do not label them or isolate them from their peers and who are prepared to work with them and their families to unlock that potential.

In addition to learning language and concepts about the physical phenomena in the world around them, children learn powerful lessons about social dynamics as they observe the interactions that educators have with them and other children as well as peer interactions. Well before age 5, most young children have rudimentary definitions of their own and others’ social identities that can include biases for their own gender and race.<sup>37</sup>

Early childhood educators need to understand the importance of creating a learning environment that helps children develop social identities which do not privilege one group over another. They must also be aware of

the potential for implicit bias that may prejudice their interactions with children of various social identities.<sup>38</sup> Educators must also recognize that their nonverbal signals may influence children’s attitudes toward their peers. For example, one recent study found that children will think a child who receives more positive nonverbal signals from a teacher is perceived as a “better” or “smarter” reader than a child who receives more negative nonverbal signals, regardless of that child’s actual reading performance.<sup>39</sup>

**5. Children’s motivation to learn is increased when their learning environment fosters their sense of belonging, purpose, and agency. Curricula and teaching methods build on each child’s assets by connecting their experiences in the school or learning environment to their home and community settings.**

This principle is drawn from the influential report *How People Learn II* and is supported by a growing body of research that affirms principles espoused more than 100 years ago by John Dewey.<sup>40</sup> The sense of belonging requires both physical and psychological safety. Seeing connections with home and community can be a powerful signal for children’s establishing psychological safety; conversely, when there are few signs of connection for children, their psychological safety is jeopardized. It is important for children to see people who look like them across levels of authority, to hear and see their home language in the learning environment, and to have learning experiences that are both culturally and linguistically affirming and responsive.<sup>41</sup>

Equally important is encouraging each child’s sense of agency. Opportunities for agency—that is, the ability to make choices about what activities one will engage in and how those activities will proceed—must be widely available for all children, not limited as a reward after completing other tasks or only offered to high-achieving students. Ultimately, motivation is a personal decision based on the learner’s determination of meaningfulness, interest, and engagement.<sup>42</sup> Educators can promote children’s agency and help them feel motivated by engaging them in challenging yet achievable tasks that build on their interests and that they recognize as meaningful and purposeful to their lives. Studies have found that some children are denied opportunities to exercise agency because they are mistakenly deemed unable to do so.<sup>43</sup> For educators, supporting a child’s agency can be especially challenging when they do not speak the same language as the child or are not able to understand a child’s attempts to express solutions or preferences. In these cases, nonverbal cues or technology may be helpful as the educator also works to address the communication barrier.

As noted earlier regarding brain development, children’s feelings of safety and security are essential for the development of higher-order thinking skills, so fostering that sense of belonging is essentially a brain-building activity. Beginning in infancy, educators who follow children’s lead in noticing their interests and responding with an appropriate action and conversation (including noting when interest wanes) are helping children develop self-confidence and an understanding that their actions make a difference. In the preschool years and continuing through the primary grades, belonging and agency remain important. Educators can involve children in choosing or creating learning experiences that are meaningful to them, helping them establish and achieve challenging goals, and reflecting on their experiences and their learning. Educators can also intentionally build bridges between children’s interests and the subject matter knowledge that will serve as the foundation for learning in later grades.

**6. Play promotes joyful learning that fosters self-regulation, language, cognitive, and social competencies as well as content knowledge across disciplines; it is essential for all children, birth through age 8.**

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All young children need daily, sustained opportunities for play, both indoors and outdoors. In all its forms—including physical play, object play, pretend or dramatic play, constructive play, and games with rules—play supports children’s learning. Play helps children develop large-motor and fine-motor physical competence, explore and make sense of their world, interact with others, express and control their emotions, develop symbolic and problem-solving abilities, and practice emerging skills. Consistently, studies find clear links between play and foundational capacities such as working memory, self-regulation, oral language abilities, social skills, and success in school.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, play embodies the characteristics of effective learning and development described in principles 4 and 5—active, meaningful engagement driven by children’s choices. Researchers studying the pedagogy of play have identified three key components: **choice** (the child’s decisions to engage in play, as well as decisions about its direction and its continuation), **wonder** (children’s continued engagement as they explore, gather information, test hypotheses, and make meaning), and **delight** (the joy and laughter associated with the pleasure of the activity, making discoveries, and achieving new things).<sup>45</sup> Play also typically involves social interaction, with peers and/or adults.

Although adults can be play partners (for example, playing peekaboo with an infant) or play facilitators (by making a suggestion to extend the activity in a certain way), the more that the adult directs an activity or interaction, the less likely it will be perceived as play by the child. When planning learning environments and activities, educators may find it helpful to consider a continuum ranging from children’s self-directed play to direct instruction.<sup>46</sup> Neither end of the continuum is effective by itself in creating a high-quality early childhood program. Effective programs do not simply let children play in the absence of a planned learning environment, nor do they predominantly offer direct instruction. In the middle of the continuum is guided play. Educators create learning environments that reflect children’s interests; they provide sustained time and opportunities for children to engage in self-directed play (individually and in small groups). Educators also strategically make comments and suggestions and ask questions to help move children toward a learning goal, even as children continue to lead the activity.<sup>47</sup>

Guided play gives educators opportunities to use children’s interests and creations to introduce new vocabulary and concepts, model complex language, and provide children with multiple opportunities to use words in context in children’s family languages as well as in English. These meaningful and engaging experiences help children—including those in kindergarten and the primary grades—build knowledge and vocabulary across subject areas and in purposeful contexts (which is more effective than memorization of word lists).<sup>48</sup>

Despite evidence that supports the value of play, not all children are afforded the opportunity to play nor judged equally in their play, particularly Black and Latinx children.<sup>49</sup> Play is often viewed as being at odds with the demands of formal schooling, especially for children growing up in under-resourced communities.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the highly didactic, highly controlling curriculum found in many kindergarten and primary grades, with its narrow focus on test-focused skill development, is unlikely to be engaging or meaningful for children; it is also unlikely to build the broad knowledge and vocabulary needed for reading comprehension in later grades. Instead, the lesson children are likely to learn is that they are not valued thinkers or successful learners in school. For example, studies suggest that students who are taught math primarily through memorization and rote learning are more than a year behind those who have been taught by relating math concepts to their existing knowledge and reflecting on their own understanding.<sup>51</sup>

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Even if not called play, cross-curricular and collaborative approaches such as project-based learning, inquiry learning, or making and tinkering share characteristics of playful learning.<sup>52</sup> Giving children autonomy and agency in how they approach problems, make hypotheses, and explore potential solutions with others promotes deeper learning and improves executive functioning.<sup>53</sup> In sum, free play, guided play, and playful learning, skillfully supported by early childhood educators, build academic language, deepen conceptual development, and support reflective and intentional approaches to learning—all of which add up to effective strategies for long-term academic success.

**7. Children learn in an integrated fashion that cuts across academic disciplines or subject areas. Because the foundations of subject area knowledge are established in early childhood, educators need subject-area knowledge, knowledge of the learning progressions within each subject area, and pedagogical knowledge about teaching each subject area’s content effectively.**

Based on their knowledge of what is meaningful and engaging to each child, educators design the learning environment and its activities to promote subject area knowledge across all content areas as well as across all domains of development. Educators use their knowledge of learning progressions for different subjects, their understanding of common conceptions and misconceptions at different points on the progressions, and their pedagogical knowledge about each subject area to develop learning activities that offer challenging but achievable goals for children that are also meaningful and engaging. These activities will look very different for infants and toddlers than for second- and third-graders and from one community of learners to another, given variations in culture and context. Across all levels and settings, educators can help children observe and, over time, reflect about phenomena in the world around them, gain vocabulary, and build their conceptual understanding of content subjects across all disciplines.

Recognizing the value of the academic disciplines, an interdisciplinary approach that considers multiple areas together is typically more meaningful than teaching content areas separately. This requires going beyond superficial connections. It means “making rich connections among domain and subject areas, but allowing each to retain its core conceptual, procedural, and epistemological structures.”<sup>54</sup> It is therefore important that educators have a good understanding of the core structures (concepts and language) for all the academic subject areas so that they can communicate them in appropriate ways to children.

Educators shape children’s conceptual development through their use of language. For example, labeling objects helps young children form conceptual categories; statements conveyed as generic descriptions about a category are especially salient to young children and, once learned, can be resistant to change.<sup>55</sup> It is also important for educators to monitor their language for potential bias. For example, educators who frequently refer to “boys” and “girls” rather than “children” emphasize binary gender distinctions that exclude some children. Educators can also encourage children’s continued exploration and discovery through the words they use. For example, children are more likely to engage in creative explorations when they are provided with more open-ended guidance versus when they are given specific information about what the object was designed to do.

From infancy through age 8, proactively building children’s conceptual and factual knowledge, including academic vocabulary, is essential because knowledge is the primary driver of comprehension. The more children (and adults) know, the better their listening comprehension and, later, reading comprehension. By building knowledge of the world in early childhood, educators are laying the foundation that is critical for all future learning.<sup>56</sup> The notion that young children are not ready for academic subject matter is a

misunderstanding of developmentally appropriate practice; particularly in grades 1 through 3, almost all subject matter can be taught in ways that are meaningful and engaging for each child.<sup>57</sup>

**8. Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery and when they have many opportunities to reflect on and practice newly acquired skills.**

Human beings, especially young children, are motivated to understand or do what is just beyond their current understanding or mastery. Drawing upon the strengths and resources each child and family brings, early childhood educators create a rich learning environment that stimulates that motivation and helps to extend each child's current skills, abilities, and interests. They make use of strategies to promote children's undertaking and mastering of new and progressively more advanced challenges. They also recognize the potential for implicit bias to lead to lowered expectations, especially for children of color,<sup>58</sup> and actively work to avoid such bias.

Educators contribute significantly to the child's development by providing the support or assistance that allows the child to succeed at a task that is just beyond their current level of skill or understanding. This includes emotional support as well as strategies such as pointing out salient details or providing other cues that can help children make connections.<sup>59</sup> As children make this stretch to a new level in a supportive context, they can go on to use the skill independently and in a variety of contexts, laying the foundation for the next challenge. Provision of such support, or scaffolding, is a key feature of effective teaching. Pairing children can be an effective way to support peer learning in which children with different abilities can scaffold each other.<sup>60</sup>

Children need to feel successful in new tasks a significant proportion of the time to promote their motivation and persistence.<sup>61</sup> Confronted by repeated failure, most children will simply stop trying. Repeated opportunities to practice and consolidate new skills and concepts are also essential for children to reach the threshold of mastery at which they can go on to use this knowledge or skill, applying it in new situations. Play (especially in intentionally designed environments with carefully selected materials) provides young children with opportunities to engage in this type of practice.

Educators foster learning for a group of children by setting challenging, achievable goals for each child, building on the combined funds of knowledge and cultural assets of the children in the group. Providing the right amount and type of scaffolding requires general knowledge of child development and learning, including familiarity with the paths and sequences that children are known to follow in specific skills, concepts, and abilities. Also essential is deep knowledge of each child, based on what the teacher has learned from close observation and from the family about the individual child's interests, skills, and abilities and about practices of importance to the family. Both sets of knowledge are critical to matching curriculum and teaching experiences to each child's emerging competencies in ways that are challenging but not frustrating.

Encouraging children to reflect on their experiences and learning and to revisit concepts over time is also an important strategy for educators. The curriculum should provide both breadth and depth with multiple opportunities to revisit concepts and experiences, rather than rapidly progressing through a wide but shallow set of experiences. Picture books and other learning materials that depict communities and situations relevant to children's lives can be useful starting points for such reflection. Group projects with documentation, including photos, videos, child artwork and representations, child dictations, and/or children's writing, are also important tools for encouraging reflection and for revisiting concepts over time.<sup>62</sup>

Tiered intervention approaches can be helpful in identifying children who might benefit from additional instruction or support.<sup>63</sup> These approaches, often in collaboration with early childhood special educators, are most effective when they are implemented in a way that is continuous, flexible, dynamic, and focused on the range of critical skills and proficiencies children need to develop and to enable their full participation in the classroom/group community.

**9. Used responsibly and intentionally, technology and interactive media can be valuable tools for supporting children’s learning and development.**

Young children live in a digital era in which technology and interactive media are pervasive. Given rapid changes in the types and uses of new media, the knowledge base of their effects on children’s development and learning continues to grow and shift. Emerging evidence suggests a number of cautions, including concerns about negative associations between excessive screen time and childhood obesity as well as negative impacts on toddlers’ performance on measures of fine motor, communication, and social skills.<sup>64</sup> There is no evidence that development is enhanced when children younger than age 2 independently use devices with screen media.<sup>65</sup> Keeping these cautions in mind, technology and interactive media can help to support developmentally appropriate practice. For example, technology and interactive media can facilitate communication with families, by children and teachers. It can also support learning, comprehension, and communication across language differences and provide adaptations that support inclusion of children with disabilities. The use of digital media can facilitate reflection through documentation and formative assessment by children, educators, and families. The use of media can also provide isolated children (for example, children with health problems that prevent them from participating in group settings or those with less well developed social skills) with opportunities to engage effectively with peers.<sup>66</sup>

Effective uses of technology and media by children are active, hands-on, engaging, and empowering; give children control; provide adaptive scaffolds to help each child progress in skills development at their individual pace; and are used as one of many options to support children’s learning. Technology and interactive media should expand children’s access to new content and new skills; they should not replace opportunities for real, hands-on experiences.<sup>67</sup> When truly integrated, uses of technology and media become routine and transparent—the child or the educator is focused on the activity or exploration itself, not the technology. Readers are encouraged to review the NAEYC/Fred Rogers Center [position statement on the use of technology](#) for more information on this topic.

## Guidelines for DAP in action: Using knowledge of child development and learning in context

Based on the principles outlined above, the following guidelines address decisions that early childhood professionals make in five key and interrelated areas of practice: (1) creating a caring community of learners; (2) engaging in reciprocal partnerships with families and fostering community connections; (3) observing, documenting and assessing children’s development and learning; (4) teaching to enhance each child’s development and learning; and (5) understanding and using content areas to plan and implement an engaging curriculum designed to meet goals that are important and meaningful for children, families, and the community in the present as well as the future. Generally consistent with previous editions of this statement, the five areas have been reworded and reordered to reflect consistency with the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators ([link](#)). These guidelines work hand in hand with the standards and competencies; they are also based on the assumption that, as part of the sixth professional standard regarding professionalism, educators are also advocating for policies and financing that support the equitable implementation of developmentally appropriate practice across all states and settings serving children birth through age 8.

### 1. Creating a caring community of learners

Because early childhood education settings are often among children’s first communities outside the home, the character of these communities is very influential in children’s development. Through their interactions, children learn how to treat others and how they can expect to be treated. In developmentally appropriate practice, educators create and foster a community of learners. The role of the community is to provide a physical, emotional, and cognitive environment conducive to development and learning for each child. The foundation for the community is consistent, positive, caring relationships between educators and other adults and children, among children, among educators and colleagues, and between educators and families. Each member of the learning community is valued for what they bring to the community; all members are supported to consider and contribute to one another’s well-being and learning.

To create a caring, equitable community of learners, educators make sure that the following occur for children from birth through the primary grades.

- A. **Each member of the community is valued by the others and is recognized for the strengths they bring.** By observing and participating in the community, children learn about themselves, their world, and how to develop positive, constructive relationships with other people. Each child has unique strengths, interests, and perspectives to contribute. Children learn to acknowledge and respect differences of all kinds and to value each person.

Educators demonstrate their valuing and respect for each child in different ways:

- 1) *Educators pronounce and spell the child’s name in accordance with the child’s and family’s preferences.*
- 2) *Educators acknowledge and accept the family composition that each family defines.*
- 3) *Educators demonstrate ongoing interest in each child’s unique knowledge, skills, and cultural and linguistic experiences and recognize these as assets for learning.*

- B. **Relationships are nurtured with each child, and educators facilitate the development of relationships among children.** Children construct their understandings about the world around them through

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interactions with other members of the community (both adults and peers). Thus, early childhood educators actively work to build their own relationships with each child as well as foster the development of relationships among the children. Educators regularly seek out opportunities for extended conversations with each child, including those with whom they do not share a language, through verbal and nonverbal interactions. Opportunities to play together, collaborate on investigations and projects, and talk with peers and adults enhance children's development and learning and should be available to all children, with support as needed. Interacting in small groups provides a context for children to extend their thinking, practice emerging language skills, build on one another's ideas, and cooperate to solve problems. (Also see guideline 2, "Engaging in reciprocal partnerships with families and fostering community connections.")

- C. **Each member of the community respects and is accountable to the others to behave in a way that is conducive to the learning and well-being of all.**
- 1) *Early childhood educators help children develop responsibility and self-regulation.* Educators intentionally model and teach children self-regulation and calming strategies. Recognizing that behaviors reflect children's experiences and needs, educators seek to understand a child's reasons for behaving in particular ways. Knowing that responsibility and self-regulation develop with experience and time, educators consider how to foster such development in their interactions with each child and in their curriculum planning. They work to provide predictable, consistent routines (but not rigid schedules with unnecessary transitions) and supportive relationships for all children, taking into consideration the range of current self-regulation abilities among the children. They do not blame children or families for their behavior but call on additional resources for support as needed. Educators also take care to reflect on their own behaviors and expectations and the ways in which these may affect children's behavior. For all young children, including in K–3 classrooms, educators recognize that children are continuing to learn and refine behavior regulation. Educators implement systems of support that help children practice self-regulation and provide additional supports where needed. When using behavioral systems to guide social and emotional interactions in the early learning setting, educators ensure that the systems acknowledge positive behaviors rather than drawing attention to negative ones.
  - 2) *Educators are responsible for all children under their supervision to ensure respectful behaviors.* They actively teach and model prosocial behaviors. They monitor, anticipate, prevent, and redirect behaviors not conducive to learning or disrespectful of any member of the community.
  - 3) *Educators set clear and reasonable limits on children's behavior, find ways to effectively communicate those limits to all children, and apply them consistently.* Early childhood educators help children be accountable to themselves and to others for their behavior. In the case of preschool and older children, educators engage children in developing their own community rules for behavior. Educators understand that all behaviors serve a purpose; they seek to understand what may be leading to that behavior and help children learn prosocial replacement behaviors when needed.
  - 4) *Educators listen to and acknowledge children's feelings, including frustrations, using words as well as nonverbal communication techniques.* Knowing that children often communicate through their behavior, especially when they are unable to verbalize their feelings, educators seek to understand what the child may be trying to communicate in any language. Educators



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respond with respect in ways that children can understand, guide children to resolve conflicts, and model skills that help children to solve their own problems.

- 5) *Educators themselves demonstrate high levels of responsibility and self-regulation in their interactions with other adults (colleagues, family members) and with children.* This includes monitoring their own behaviors for potential implicit biases or microaggressions on the basis of race, gender, disability, or other characteristics that unfairly target children or adults in the early learning setting, undermine an individual's self-worth, or perpetuate negative stereotypes.

**D. The physical environment protects the health and safety of the learning community members, and it specifically supports young children's physiological needs for play, activity, sensory stimulation, fresh air, rest, and nourishment.** The daily schedule provides frequent opportunities for self-directed play and active, physical movement, regardless of the length of the program day or the ages of the children. Children are provided opportunities for rest as needed. Outdoor experiences, including opportunities to interact with the natural world, are provided daily for children of all ages. This includes daily periods of recess for children through the primary grades. Recess is never withheld as a punishment. Mealtimes are unhurried, and conversation among children is encouraged during meals.

**E. Every effort is made to help each and every member of the community feel psychologically safe and able to focus on being and learning.** The overall social and emotional climate is welcoming and positive.

- 1) *Educators monitor interactions among community members (administrators, educators, families, children), as well as their overall experiences, striving to make sure that participants feel secure, relaxed, and comfortable rather than disengaged, frightened, worried, or unduly stressed.*
- 2) *Educators build on individual children's funds of knowledge,<sup>68</sup> interests, languages, and experiences to foster each child's enjoyment of and engagement in learning.*
- 3) *Educators ensure that the environment is organized in ways that support play and learning and that create a positive group climate.* Space, time, and stimulation are modified to take into account children's individual needs and feelings of psychological safety. Educators recognize that individual children may need or benefit from different levels of stimulation. They avoid overly cluttered environments that may be too stimulating. Flexibility and freedom of movement predominate throughout the day. Although the environment's elements are dynamic and changing, the overall structures and routines are predictable and comprehensible from a child's point of view.
- 4) *Educators strive to make sure that each child hears and sees their home language, culture, and family experience reflected in the daily interactions, activities, and materials in the early learning setting.* Each child's various social identities are affirmed in positive ways that do not negatively impact any others. Stereotypical thinking and messages are countered with opportunities to engage in more sophisticated and accurate thinking.
- 5) *Educators are aware of implicit bias and actively monitor their own behaviors through self-reflection and dialogue with others.* They work to avoid microaggressions in their interactions with children. They also confront biased or stereotypical comments in interactions among children and/or adults. When they inadvertently engage in behavior that hurts or undermines an individual's self-worth, educators model how to manage negative emotions and to repair relationships.

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- 6) *Educators are prepared to recognize signs of stress and trauma in young children and seek access to early childhood mental health experts, supports, and resources to provide healing-centered approaches to assist children.* Educators recognize that children who have experienced trauma(s) may need frequent, explicit, and consistent reminders that they are psychologically and physically safe. Educators also keep children’s resilience in mind, knowing that simple actions like being consistently warm and caring support healthy development for all children—including those who have experienced trauma(s).

### 2. Engaging in reciprocal partnerships with families and fostering community connections

Developmentally appropriate practice requires deep knowledge about each child, including the context within which each of them is living. The younger the child, the more necessary it is for educators to acquire this knowledge through respectful, reciprocal relationships with children’s families. Across all ages, families’ expertise about their own children is sought out and valued.

Educators who engage in developmentally appropriate practice take responsibility for forming and maintaining strong relationships with families and communities. They recognize that the traditional models of “parent involvement” or “parent education” are one-sided approaches that fail to give educators the knowledge or insights they need to provide learning experiences that are fully responsive to each child’s needs and experiences.

The following descriptions of educators’ behavior indicate the kinds of relationships that are developmentally appropriate for children from birth through the primary grades, in which family members and educators work together as members of the learning community.

- A. **Educators take responsibility for establishing respectful, reciprocal relationships with and among families.** As they work to facilitate their own relationships with families, educators also encourage and support families to get to know each other, serve as resources to each other, and collaborate within and outside of the program. They strive to ensure mutual respect, cooperation, and shared responsibility and to help negotiate conflicts as they work toward achievement of shared goals. (Also see guideline 1, “Creating a caring community of learners.”)
- B. **Educators work in collaborative partnerships with families, seeking and maintaining regular, frequent, two-way communication with them and recognizing that the forms of communication may differ for each family.** When educators do not speak a family’s home language, they enlist the help of community resources to provide bilingual interpreters or use volunteers identified by the family. The use of children as translators is avoided.
- C. **Educators welcome family members in the setting and create multiple opportunities for family participation.** Families are offered multiple ways of participating, including weighing in on any program decision about their children’s care and education. If families and educators cannot communicate with educators during drop-offs and pick-ups, alternative means provide frequent, ongoing communication.
- D. **Educators acknowledge a family’s choices and goals for their child and respond with sensitivity and respect to those preferences and concerns.** In the event of disagreements between the family and the educator, educators listen carefully to the family’s concerns and strive to find mutually agreeable solutions.

- E. **Educators and the family share with each other their knowledge of the particular child and understanding of child development and learning as part of day-to-day and other forms of communication (family get-togethers, meetings, support groups, and so on).** Educators support families in ways that maximally promote family decision-making capabilities and competence. When communicating with families about their children, educators stress children’s strengths and abilities and use this information to support future instructional decisions.
- F. **Educators involve families as a source of information about the child (before program entry and on an ongoing basis).** They engage families in the planning for their child, including teaching practices, curriculum planning and implementation, and assessments.
- G. **Educators take care to learn about the community in which they work, and they use the community as a resource across all aspects of program delivery.** The community serves as an important resource for implementing the curriculum as well as a resource for linking families with a range of services based on identified priorities and concerns. Early childhood educators also look for ways that they can contribute to the ongoing development of the community.

### 3. Observing, documenting, and assessing children’s development and learning

Observing, documenting, and assessing each child’s development and learning are essential processes for educators and programs to plan, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of the experiences they provide to children. Assessment includes both formal and informal measures as tools for monitoring children’s progress toward a program’s desired goals. In developmentally appropriate practice, the experiences and the assessments are linked (the experiences are developing what is being assessed, and vice versa); both are aligned with the program’s desired outcomes or goals for children. Educators can be intentional about helping children to progress when they know where each child is with respect to learning goals. Formative assessment (measuring progress toward goals) and summative assessment (measuring achievement at the end of a defined period or experience) are important. Both need to be conducted in ways that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive to authentically assess children’s learning. This means that not only must the methods of assessment, both formal and informal, be developmentally, culturally, and linguistically sensitive, but also the assessor must be aware of and work against the possibility of implicit and explicit bias, for example through training, reflection, and regular reviews of collected data.

Effective assessment of young children is challenging. The complexity of children’s development and learning—including the uneven nature of development and the likelihood of children fully demonstrating their knowledge and skills in different contexts—makes accurate and comprehensive assessment difficult. For example, authentic assessment takes into consideration such factors as a child’s facility in each language they speak and uses assessors and settings that are familiar and comfortable for the child. When standardized assessments are used for screening or evaluative purposes, the measures should meet standards of reliability and validity based on the characteristics of the child being assessed. When these standards are not met, these limitations must be carefully considered before using the results. Using assessments in ways that do not support enhancing the child’s education is not developmentally appropriate practice. Decisions regarding assessment practices are often outside of the control of individual educators (also see Recommendations for programs, page 30). When educators are aware of inappropriate assessment practices, they have a professional ethical responsibility to make their concerns known and to advocate for more appropriate practices.

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The following practices for observation, documentation, and assessment are developmentally appropriate for children from birth through the primary grades.

- A. **Observation, documentation, and assessment of young children’s progress and achievements is ongoing, strategic, reflective, and purposeful.** Observations, documentations, and the results of other formal and informal assessments are used to inform the planning and implementing of daily curriculum and experiences, to communicate with the child’s family, and to evaluate and improve educators’ and the program’s effectiveness. Especially in K–3 classrooms, care must be taken to avoid overuse of performance-based assessments, which can cause stress for young children and interfere with time for learning. Educators limit the use of computer-based assessments, especially for young children who (appropriately) have limited exposure to computer use.
- B. **Assessment focuses on children’s progress toward goals that are developmentally and educationally significant.** Such goals should reflect families’ input as well as children’s background knowledge and experiences. They should be informed by developmental milestones including use of state early learning standards. Important goals should be aspirational and achievable and should foster a sense of pride and accomplishment for educators, families, and children. Children, educators, and families should have opportunities to celebrate both small and large achievements, while recognizing that all children need time to build mastery on a current skill before progressing to the next challenge.
- C. **A system is in place to collect, make sense of, and use observations, documentation, and assessment information to guide what goes on in the early learning setting.** Educators use this information in planning curriculum and learning experiences and in moment-to-moment interactions with children—that is, educators continually engage in assessment for the purpose of improving teaching and learning. Educators also encourage children to use observation and, beginning in the preschool years, documentation to reflect on their experiences and what they have learned. A plan is in place for employing volunteer and paid interpreters and translators as needed and providing them with information about appropriate interactions with young children and ethics and confidentiality, as well as about the features and purposes of the screening or assessment tool.
- D. **The methods of assessment are responsive to the current developmental accomplishments, language(s), and experiences of young children. They recognize individual variation in learners and allow children to demonstrate their competencies in different ways.** Methods appropriate to educators’ assessment of young children, therefore, include results of their observations of children, clinical interviews, collections of children’s work samples, and children’s performance on authentic activities. For children who speak a language the educators do not know, native speakers of the child’s language such as family or community members may need to be recruited to assist with the assessment process. Once collected, the results are explained to families and children (as appropriate) in order to extend the conversations around what is collected, analyzed, and reflected upon.
- E. **Assessment looks not only at what children can do independently but also at what they can do with assistance from other children or adults.** Therefore, educators assess children as they participate in groups and in other situations that provide scaffolding.
- F. **In addition to assessments by educators, input from families and children’s own evaluations of their work are part of the program’s overall assessment strategy.**

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

- G. **Assessments are used only for the populations and purposes for which they have been demonstrated to produce reliable, valid information.** If required to use an assessment tool that has not been established as reliable or valid for the characteristics of a given child or for the intended use, educators recognize the limitations of the findings, strive to make sure they are not used in high-stakes decisions, and advocate for a different measure.
- H. **Decisions that have a major impact on children, such as enrollment or placement, are made in consultation with and with the approval of families.** Such decisions should be based on multiple sources of relevant information, including that obtained from observations of and interactions with children by educators, family members, and specialists as needed.
- I. **When a screening assessment identifies a child who may have a disability or individualized learning or developmental needs, there is appropriate follow-up, evaluation, and, if indicated, referral.** Screening is used to identify issues needing more thorough examination by those qualified to do so; it is not used to diagnose or label children. Families are involved as essential sources of information.

### 4. Teaching to enhance each child’s development and learning

Developmentally appropriate teaching practices encompass a wide range of skills and strategies that are adapted to the age, development, individual characteristics, and the family and social and cultural contexts of each child served. Grounded in the caring relationships that educators nurture with each child and family as well as among all children and families (see guideline 1, “Creating a caring community of learners”), these teaching practices are designed to foster learning and development for each child across all domains and subject areas. Teaching practices build on each child’s multiple assets and actively counter various forms of bias. Through their intentional teaching, educators blend opportunities for each child to exercise choice and agency within the context of a planned environment constructed to support specific learning experiences and meaningful goals. Educators recognize that children are active constructors of their own understanding of the world around them; they understand that children benefit from initiating and regulating their own learning activities and from interacting with peers.

Recognizing play as critical for children to experience joy and wonder, early childhood educators incorporate frequent opportunities for play in their teaching strategies. They plan learning environments that provide a mix of self-directed-play, guided play, and direct instruction. Educators maximize opportunities for children to choose the materials, playmates, topics, and approaches they use throughout the day for all children, birth through age 8. Educators support and extend children’s play experiences by providing materials and resources based on careful observation of children’s play choices. Adult-guided activities provide for children’s active agency as educators offer specific guidance and support to scaffold and extend children’s interest, engagement, and learning. Direct instruction—for example, providing children with relevant academic vocabulary, pointing out relationships, helping children recognize specific phenomena, or suggesting an alternative perspective—is an important tool for supporting children’s learning. Its effectiveness is determined by the degree to which it extends children’s interests and learning in meaningful ways and educators’ sensitivity to changes in children’s interest. Individually or in small or large groups, across all activities—self-directed play, guided play, direct instruction, and routines—the teacher is responsible for ensuring that each child’s overall experiences are stimulating, engaging, and developmentally, linguistically, and culturally responsive across all domains of development and learning. Promoting many opportunities for agency for each child is essential to fulfilling this responsibility.

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

The following descriptions of educators' actions illustrate teaching practices that are developmentally appropriate for young children from birth through the primary grades.

- A. **Educators demonstrate and model their commitment to a caring learning community through their actions, demeanor, and curiosity.** They recognize that through their actions, they are influencing children's lifelong dispositions, confidence, and approaches to learning.
- B. **Educators use their knowledge of each child and family to make learning experiences meaningful, accessible, and responsive to each and every child.** Building on the relationships they nurture with each child and family and between children (see also guideline 1, "Creating a caring community of learners"), educators design learning activities that reflect the lives and cultures of each child.
- 1) *Educators incorporate and integrate a wide variety of experiences, materials, equipment, and teaching strategies to accommodate the range of children's individual differences in development, languages, skills and abilities, disabilities, prior experiences, needs, and interests.*
  - 2) *Educators, with the support of families, bring each child's home culture(s) and language(s) into the shared culture of the learning community.* They model recognition and valuing of the unique contributions of the home cultures and languages so that these contributions can be recognized and valued by the other community members. They strategically use the child's home or family language and cultural ways of learning to enhance each child's communication, comprehension, self-expression, and learning. Educators continually strive to support and sustain each child's connection with their family, languages, and cultures.
  - 3) *Educators provide all children opportunities to participate in all activities and encourage children to be inclusive in their behaviors and interactions with peers.*
  - 4) *Educators are prepared to individualize their teaching strategies to meet the specific needs of individual children, including children with disabilities, by building upon their interests, knowledge, and skills.* Educators use all the strategies identified here and consult with appropriate specialists and the child's family; they see that each child gets the adaptations and specialized services needed for full inclusion as a member of the community and that no child is penalized for their status.
- D. **Educators take responsibility for knowing what the desired goals for the program are and how the program's curriculum is intended to achieve those goals.** They carry out the curriculum through their teaching in ways that are geared to young children in general and meaningful and responsive to these children in particular. They design activities that follow the predictable sequences in which children acquire specific concepts, skills, and abilities and by building on prior experiences and understandings. (Also see guideline 5, "Understanding and using content areas to plan and implement an engaging curriculum designed to meet goals that are important and meaningful for children, families, and the community in the present as well as the future.")
- E. **Educators effectively implement a comprehensive curriculum so that each child attains individualized goals across all domains (physical, social, emotional, cognitive, linguistic, and general learning competencies) and across all subject areas (language and literacy, including second language acquisition, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, physical education, and health).** Educators follow Universal Design for Learning principles by proactively providing multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation, and multiple means of action and expression.<sup>69</sup> Educators design

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

experiences that celebrate the diversity in the experiences and social identities of each group of children and counter the biases in society. They build upon the children’s combined funds of knowledge to foster each child’s learning and understanding.

**F. Educators plan the environment, schedule, and daily activities to promote each child’s learning and development.**

- 1) *Educators arrange firsthand, meaningful experiences that are cognitively and creatively stimulating, invite exploration and investigation, and engage children’s active, sustained involvement.* They do this by providing a rich variety of materials, challenges, and ideas that are worthy of children’s attention and that reflect the funds of knowledge each child brings to the setting. Materials are periodically rotated and revisited to provide children with opportunities to reflect and re-engage with the learning experiences.
- 2) *Educators consistently present children with opportunities to make meaningful choices.* Children are encouraged to shape specific learning activities and to identify projects that can be used to extend their learning. Children are regularly provided with opportunities for child-choice activity periods—not simply as a reward for completing other work. Educators assist and guide children who are not yet able to enjoy and make good use of such periods.
- 3) *Educators organize the daily and weekly schedules to provide children with extended blocks of time in which to engage in sustained investigation, exploration, interaction, and play.* Children are encouraged to freely interact with peers and collaborative learning opportunities with peers are frequently used. Adults offer questions to stimulate children’s thinking, introduce related vocabulary, and provide specific suggestions to scaffold children’s thinking. As much as possible, educators use multiple languages to support emerging bilinguals and also use nonverbal means of communication such as images and gestures.
- 4) *Educators routinely provide experiences, materials, and interactions to enable children to engage in play.* Play allows children to stretch their boundaries to the fullest in their imagination, language, interaction, and self-regulation, as well as to practice their newly acquired skills. It also provides an important window for educators to observe children’s skills and understandings.
- 5) *Educators create language-rich environments that focus on the diversity and complexity of language provided to children.* Given the importance of vocabulary for conceptual development and as the key building blocks for academic subject areas, this is especially crucial. Educators affirm children’s use of home dialects, vernaculars, and language as strengths as they also support the development of academic English.

**G. Educators possess an extensive repertoire of skills and strategies they can use effectively.** They know how and when to choose among them to effectively promote each child’s learning and development at that moment. Such skills include the ability to adapt curriculum, activities, and materials to ensure full participation of all children. These strategies include but are not limited to acknowledging, encouraging, giving specific feedback, modeling, demonstrating, adding challenge, giving cues or other assistance, providing information, and giving directions.

- 1) *To help children develop agency, educators encourage them to choose and plan their own learning activities.* Self-directed learning activities are important for all young children, including those in K–3

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classrooms. Self-directed activities can engage children in meaningful learning that is relevant to all curriculum and applicable learning standards.

- 2) *To stimulate children’s thinking and extend their learning, educators pose problems, ask questions, and make comments and suggestions.*
- 3) *To extend the range of children’s interests and the scope of their thoughts, educators present novel experiences and introduce stimulating ideas, problems, experiences, or hypotheses.*
- 4) *To adjust the complexity and challenge of activities to suit children’s skills and knowledge, educators increase the challenge as children gain competence and understanding or reduce the complexity for those who struggle.*
- 5) *To strengthen children’s sense of competence and confidence as learners, motivation to persist, and willingness to take risks, educators provide experiences that build on a child’s funds of knowledge, are culturally and linguistically responsive, and are designed for each child to be challenged and genuinely successful.*
- 6) *To enhance children’s conceptual understanding, early childhood educators use various strategies, including conversation and documentation, which encourage children to reflect on and revisit their experiences in the moment and over time.*
- 7) *To encourage and foster children’s learning and development, educators avoid generic praise (“Good job!”) and instead give specific feedback (“You got the same number when you counted the beans again!”). They use the home or family language, images, or other forms of non-verbal communication to be sure the child understands the feedback. With frequent, timely, specific feedback, educators help children evaluate their own learning and success.*
- 8) *Educators focus on what children can do rather than what they can’t or don’t do. For example, a child who responds to a question asked in academic English by speaking in their home dialect is recognized for their receptive language. Similarly, invented spellings or other “errors” in children’s thinking or language are analyzed for what they reveal of children’s current understanding.*

H. **Educators know how and when to scaffold children’s learning.** Based on their ongoing interactions and knowledge of each child, educators provide just enough assistance to enable each child to perform at a skill level just beyond what the child can do on their own, then gradually reduce the support as the child begins to master the skill, setting the stage for the next challenge.

- 1) *Educators recognize and respond to the reality that in any group, children’s skills will vary and they will need different levels of support.* Educators also know that any one child’s level of skill and need for support will vary over time and in different circumstances.
- 2) *Scaffolding can take a variety of forms, such as giving the child a hint, providing a cue, modeling the skill, or adapting the materials and activities.* It can be provided in a variety of contexts, not only in planned learning experiences but also in free play, daily routines, and outdoor activities.
- 3) *Peers can be effective providers of scaffolding in addition to educators.* Peer learning can be an especially effective mechanism to provide individual support and assistance across all areas of development and learning. Peer learning can be especially useful for emergent bilinguals.

I. **Educators know how and when to strategically use the various learning formats and contexts.**

- 1) *Educators understand that each major learning format or context (for example, large group, small group, learning center, routine) has its own characteristics, functions, and value.* They consider the characteristics of the learners in choosing the most appropriate format, such as limiting the use of



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large groups with very young children or of groups led in a language not understood by all the children. Educators recognize that children need to balance directed, attentive behavior periods with time for more active movement. Circle time and large group instruction periods are limited in length to match age-appropriate attention span limits. Breaks for self-directed and active play are provided throughout the day. Flexibility of participation is provided to all children to accommodate individual needs.

- 2) *Educators think carefully about which learning format is best for helping children achieve a desired goal, given the children’s ages, abilities, experiences, temperaments, and other characteristics.* Especially in the case of large group activities, they change formats when attention wanes. In K–3 classrooms, educators ensure that individual seatwork is used only when it is the most effective format for meeting the learning objective. They encourage collaborative learning through peer interaction and provide frequent opportunities for children to support each other’s learning through pairs and small groups. Educators strive for ways to build in movement throughout the day, including the use of learning activities that incorporate movement.
- 3) *Educators minimize time in transitions and waiting for children to line up or be quiet.* Educators who document how children spend their time are often surprised at how much time is spent in transitions, often in ways that do little to support children’s learning and development<sup>70</sup>. Reducing the time and amount of full-group activities, providing children with advance notice of the transition, and incorporating songs, pretend play, and/or movement into the transition can be useful strategies to make the most of these times. Educators strive to reduce the need for transitions through flexible schedules, use of staff and volunteers, and in helping children take responsibility for their own learning.

**J. Educators differentiate instructional approaches to match each child’s interests, knowledge, and skills.** Children who need additional support receive even more extended, enriched, and intensive learning experiences than are provided to their peers, always building on the child’s current interests, strengths, and cultural ways of knowing.

- 1) *Educators take care to provide each child with opportunities to be successful and to engage in joyful learning.* They work to avoid children having frustrating or discouraging experiences that lead to a negative association with schooling.
- 2) *Regardless of their need for additional support, all children are provided agency to the greatest extent possible.* Educators are highly intentional in use of time, and they focus on key skills and abilities through highly engaging experiences to build on the assets of children and their families.
- 3) *Recognizing the self-regulatory, linguistic, cognitive, and social benefits that play affords, educators do not reduce or eliminate play opportunities, recess, or any other important community and inclusive activities for children who need additional support to meet school readiness/grade level or behavioral expectations.*

### 5. Planning and implementing an engaging curriculum to achieve meaningful goals

The curriculum consists of the knowledge, skills, abilities, and understandings children are to acquire and the plans for the learning experiences through which those gains will occur. Implementing a curriculum always yields outcomes of some kind—but which outcomes those are and how a program achieves them are critical. In developmentally appropriate practice, the curriculum helps young children achieve goals that are meaningful because they are culturally and linguistically responsive and developmentally and educationally

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

significant. The curriculum does this through learning experiences (including play, small group, large group, interest centers, and routines) that reflect what is known about young children in general and about each child in particular, as well as about the sequences in which children tend to acquire concepts, skills, and abilities, building on prior experiences.

The idea of mirrors and windows<sup>71</sup> is useful for curriculum development. The curriculum should provide mirrors so that children see themselves, their families, and their communities reflected in the learning environment, materials, and activities. The curriculum should also provide windows on the world so that children learn about peoples, places, arts, sciences, and so on that they would otherwise not encounter. In diverse and inclusive learning communities, one child's mirrors are another child's windows, making for wonderful opportunities for collaborative learning.

Because children learn more in programs where there is a knowledge-rich, well-rounded curriculum that is well planned and implemented, it is important for every school and early childhood program to have its curriculum in written form. Having a written curriculum does not preclude the use of an emergent curriculum based on children's interests and experiences that is also aligned with applicable early learning standards. Use of a formal, validated curriculum can be helpful, so long as educators have the flexibility to adapt units and activities to meet the interests and experiences of each group of specific children. Rigid, narrowly defined, skills-focused, and highly teacher-scripted curricula that do not provide flexibility for adapting to individual skills and interests are not developmentally appropriate.

Educators use the curriculum, along with their knowledge of the specific children in their care, to plan relevant, engaging learning experiences; they keep the curriculum in mind in their interactions with children throughout the day. In this way they ensure that children's learning experiences are consistent with the program's goals for children and connected within an organized framework. At the same time, developmentally appropriate practice means educators have flexibility—and the expertise to exercise that flexibility effectively—in how they design and carry out curricular experiences. Ideally, the curriculum is planned in a coordinated fashion across age and grade spans so that children's knowledge and skills are developed in a coherent, aligned manner, with each age or grade span building on what was learned previously.

A well-designed developmentally and culturally relevant curriculum avoids and counters cultural or individual bias or stereotypes and fosters a positive learning disposition in each area of the curriculum and in each child. It includes broad concepts that can be tailored to meet the specific interests of a specific group of children and provides for revisiting concepts in greater depth over time.

The following key factors, taken together, describe curriculum planning that is developmentally appropriate for children from birth through the primary grades.

- A. **Desired goals that are important for young children's learning and development in general and culturally and linguistically responsive to these children in particular have been identified and clearly articulated.**
  - 1) *Educators consider what children are expected to know, understand, and be able to do when they leave the setting.* This includes across the domains of physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development and across the disciplines, including language, literacy, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, physical education, and health.

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

- 2) *Educators are thoroughly familiar with state learning standards or other mandates. They add to these any goals given inadequate weight in the standards.*
  - 3) *Educators and administrators establish and regularly update goals with input from all stakeholders, including families. Goals are clearly defined for, communicated to, and understood by all stakeholders, including families.*
- B. The program has a comprehensive, effective curriculum that targets the identified goals across all domains of development and subject areas.**
- 1) *Whether or not educators participated in the development of the curriculum, they familiarize themselves with it and consider its comprehensiveness in addressing all important goals.*
  - 2) *When the program uses published curriculum products, the selected products are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive for the children served and provide flexibility for educators to make adaptations to meet the specific interests and learning needs of the children they are teaching.*
  - 3) *If educators develop the curriculum themselves, they make certain it targets identified learning goals and applicable early learning standards. They actively engage families and communities to inform its development. Educators use strong, up-to-date resources from experts to ensure that curriculum content is accurate and comprehensive.*
- C. Educators use the curriculum framework in their planning to make sure there is ample attention to important learning goals and to enhance the coherence of the overall experience for children.**
- 1) *Educators are familiar with the understandings and skills that are key for the children in their group in each domain (physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive). They know how learning and development in one domain impacts the other domains and crosses subject areas. They recognize that making sure the curriculum is culturally and linguistically relevant for each child is essential for supporting all learning and development across all domains and subject areas.*
  - 2) *In their planning and follow-through, educators use the curriculum framework along with what they know (from their observation, documentation, and other assessment) about the children’s knowledge, interests, progress, languages, and learning needs. They carefully shape and adapt the experiences to be responsive to each child and to enable each child to reach the goals outlined in the curriculum.*
  - 3) *In determining the sequence and pace of learning experiences, educators consider the learning progressions that children typically follow, including the typical sequences in which skills and concepts develop. To maximize language development, educators recognize differences in developmental progressions for monolingual and bilingual children and support the development of multilingualism. Educators use these progressions with an eye toward helping each children progress in all areas, and they make adaptations as needed for individual children. When children’s experiences have not matched the expectations for schooling, educators can both work to change inappropriate expectations and adapt the curriculum to build on children’s strengths and help them gain skills and knowledge. Such adaptations should maintain children’s agency; children can be partners with educators in guiding their learning, which reinforces high expectations and beliefs (on the part of both the child and the educator) in that child’s potential.*
- D. Educators make meaningful connections a priority in the learning experiences they provide each child.** They understand that all learners, and certainly young children, learn best when the concepts, language,

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

and skills they encounter are related to things they know and care about, and when the new learnings are themselves interconnected in meaningful, coherent ways.

- 1) *Educators plan curriculum experiences that integrate children’s learning.* They integrate learning within and across developmental domains (physical, social, emotional, linguistic, and cognitive) and subject areas (including language, literacy, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, physical education, and health).
- 2) *Educators plan curriculum experiences to build on the funds of knowledge of each child, family, and community in order to offer culturally and linguistically sustaining learning experiences.* Educators build on things that have meaning in the children’s lives and are likely to interest them, in recognition that developing and extending children’s interests is particularly important when children’s ability to focus their attention is in its early stages.
- 3) *Educators plan curriculum experiences that follow logical sequences and that allow for depth, focus, and revisiting concepts.* That is, learning sequences allow children to spend sustained time with a more select set of content areas rather than skimming briefly over a wide range of topics. Educators plan to return to experiences in ways that facilitate children’s memory and further understanding of concepts.

- E. **Educators collaborate with those teaching in the preceding and subsequent age bands/grade levels, sharing information about children and working to increase continuity and coherence across ages/grades.** They also work to protect the integrity and appropriateness of practices at each level. For example, educators advocate for continuity in the curriculum that is coherent, consistent, and based on the principles of developmentally appropriate practice.
- F. **Although it will vary across the age span, a planned and written curriculum is in place for all age groups.** Even if it is not called a curriculum, infant and toddler educators plan for the ways in which routines and experiences promote each child’s learning and development. With infants and toddlers, desired goals will focus heavily on fostering secure relationships with caregivers and family members in ways that are culturally and linguistically responsive. Although social, emotional, and language development—including the home language as much as possible—take center stage, these interactions and experiences are also laying the foundation for vocabulary and concepts that support later academic development across all subject areas. For preschool, kindergarten, and primary grades, the curriculum will deepen and extend to reflect children’s more complex knowledge and skills across all subject areas. Continuing to provide culturally and linguistically sustaining care and supporting all domains of development as well as all subject areas remain essential.

### 6. Demonstrating professionalism as an early childhood educator

Although this position statement may offer information and support to many individuals engaged in or interested in the support of early childhood development and learning, it is particularly geared toward early childhood educators. Developmentally appropriate practice serves as the hallmark of the early childhood education profession. Fully achieving these guidelines and effectively promoting all young children’s development and learning depends on the establishment of a strong profession with which all early childhood educators, working across all settings, identify. Educators use the guidelines of the profession, including these guidelines, as they conduct themselves as members of the profession and serve as informed advocates for young children and their families as well as the profession itself. Standard 6 of the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators ([link](#)) outlines specific expectations

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

by which early childhood educators demonstrate their professionalism, and readers are referred to this statement for more specific information in this regard.

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## Recommendations for implementing DAP

Educators make decisions that result in developmentally appropriate practice within a bigger system that includes the specific program setting and extends to larger society. Whether educators can fully implement developmentally appropriate practice depends on decisions at many levels, including program administration, higher education, professional development, research, and public policy. Developmentally appropriate decision making by early childhood educators is facilitated when all aspects of the overall system reflect the tenets described here to support the optimal development and learning of each and every child. The following recommendations are offered in that regard.

### 1. Recommendations for schools, family child care homes, and other program settings

The following recommendations focus on ways that all program settings can support educators in implementing developmentally appropriate practice. In small programs and family child care homes, the educator may also be responsible for program administrative aspects discussed here.

- A. **Support educators' access to higher education and professional development opportunities that allow them to build the knowledge, skills, and dispositions identified in the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators, and ensure they are prepared to carry out each of these guidelines.** This may include providing coaching, mentoring, planning time, and release time to support educators in their ongoing professional development journeys.
- B. **Support and incentivize professional development for administrators, supervisors, and those responsible for assessment and evaluation of early childhood educators to ensure they understand the principles and guidelines of developmentally appropriate practice and use them to inform decisions regarding program implementation.**
- C. **Make sure that program policies facilitate and support strong, continuous relationships between teaching staff and children by offering working conditions and compensation (wages and benefits) that attract and retain a diverse and qualified staff.** Policies should ensure continuity of care for children, with groups and child-to-staff ratios that meet the profession's guidelines. Across all levels of seniority, staff should reflect the diversity (including race, language, and gender) of the community and children served.
- D. **Seek and maintain early learning program accreditation based on systems that are built to support developmentally appropriate practice.**
- E. **Strive to ensure that the school or program provides equitable learning opportunities to all children to help them achieve their full potential and avoids the use of suspension or expulsion.**
- F. **Ensure that the curriculum promotes all domains of development while providing a coherent and flexible framework that supports educators in making adaptations to meet the unique interests and needs of the children they are serving.** Minimize "initiative" fatigue in which new curricular approaches are frequently adopted and then rejected.
- G. **Provide mentoring and coaching for educators and administrators to encourage reflection and continuous learning about the children, families, and communities served.** Educators also need ongoing opportunities to reflect on their practice and to extend and deepen their repertoire of effective teaching strategies. Peer support and coaching groups across age spans and grade levels

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

can be an important way of supporting the coherence and continuity of children’s learning experiences.

- H. **Actively engage family members and the broader community in all aspects of program planning and implementation, recognizing and taking into account the systemic inequities that can make it difficult for members of traditionally marginalized groups to participate.**
- I. **Cultivate relationships with community resources, including local libraries, museums, public parks, physical and mental health consultants, and government services that can support the program and families and to strengthen civic connections.**

### 2. Recommendations for higher education and adult development

In addition to these recommendations, readers are encouraged to also refer to the Unifying Framework for Early Childhood Professional Development [\(link\)](#) and the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators [\(link\)](#).

- A. **Adopt and align coursework to the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators, with the appropriate leveling and with emphasis on equity and diversity, as part of the overall implementation of Power to the Profession.**
- B. **Prepare current and prospective early childhood educators to understand and implement all components of developmentally appropriate practice and to provide equitable learning opportunities for all young children.** Ensure that educators understand the systemic inequities that have limited many children’s opportunities for learning, and that they are prepared to fully support the optimal development and learning of each and every child. Recruit and support teacher candidates who reflect the diversity of children and families.
- C. **Ensure that clinical practicums, internships, and apprenticeships for prospective educators provide experiences working in various settings (including schools, centers, and family child care homes) that serve racially, linguistically, culturally, and economically diverse groups of children across all age groups, including children with and without disabilities.**
- D. **Ensure that faculty in higher education programs reflect the diversity of children and families and that they understand and embrace the principles and guidelines of developmentally appropriate practices.**

### 3. Recommendations for policymakers

In addition to these recommendations, readers are encouraged to also refer to the Unifying Framework for Early Childhood Professional Development [\(link\)](#) and the NAEYC position statement Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education [\(link\)](#).

- A. **Ensure that all those working directly with children in early childhood settings, from birth through age 8, have equitable, affordable access to high-quality professional preparation needed to meet the standards and competencies at all professional designations, as defined by the profession.** This may include providing comprehensive scholarships, loan forgiveness, and supports to early childhood educators working in all settings.

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

- B. **Provide sufficient funding to ensure all children have equitable access to high-quality early childhood programs that meet these guidelines and follow other guidelines established by the profession, including small class/group sizes and sufficient numbers of well-prepared and well-compensated teaching staff to provide the individualized attention needed to implement these guidelines effectively (and as stipulated in the NAEYC Early Learning Program Standards).**
- C. **Recognize the limitations of accountability systems that narrowly focus on skill-based assessments and revise policies accordingly.** Assessment policies should stipulate the use of authentic assessments that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for the children being assessed and that only use valid and reliable tools designed for a purpose consistent with the intent of the assessment. Assessments should be tied to children’s daily activities, supported by professional development, and inclusive of families; they should be purposefully used to make sound decisions about teaching and learning, identify significant concerns that may require focused intervention for individual children, and help programs improve their educational and developmental interventions.
- D. **Provide more equitable learning opportunities for all young children, recognizing the need for comprehensive services for families.** Address the historical inequities in housing, employment, acquisition of wealth, transportation, and health care that directly impact children’s development and learning.

### 4. Recommendations for research

Much remains to be learned about how to maximize each child’s development and learning. Here are important areas for further study.

- A. **Identify which instructional strategies (and other characteristics of early childhood programs) work most effectively for which children under which circumstances.**
- B. **Identify strategies by which educators can recognize and effectively address their implicit biases to provide more equitable learning opportunities for all children.**
- C. **Develop assessment methodologies that fully capture the complexity and diversity of children’s development and learning in authentic, reliable, and valid ways that consider multiple aspects of children’s identities and reflect various cultural ways of learning.**
- D. **Continue to explore various dimensions of young children’s development and learning, teaching quality, dimensions of effective teaching, and the ways in which these play out in different social and cultural contexts.** Because the knowledge base is constantly improving, further applied research is needed to revise and refine this definition of developmentally appropriate practice. The research community plays an important role in leading and synthesizing research on child development and learning across multiple social, cultural, and linguistic contexts and across specific educational settings that can both inform and be informed by the practices of early childhood educators.
- E. **Identify areas of deeper knowledge needed to help monolingual and multilingual teachers understand how and why to adapt strategies and environments to meet the needs of children who are learning more than one language.**



## Conclusion

Since the release of *Minimum Essentials for Nursery Education* in 1929 (shortly after the founding of NAEYC's predecessor organization), this association has connected practice, policy, and research as it has worked toward the goal of improving the quality of early childhood education services for young children. While many of the recommendations have changed considerably over the years, the primary focus remains the same: NAEYC emphasizes the importance of the relationships between children and well-prepared teachers who understand and can effectively support all domains of child development and learning as they nurture and strength connections with the child's family and community. We continue to refine the ways in which we describe how developmentally appropriate practices can recognize and support the diversity and complexity of human development and promote more equitable learning opportunities for each and every young child. Over time, with more research and evidence of practice, further refinements will be made to this statement. What will not change is the overarching goal of ensuring that all young children have equitable access to developmentally appropriate, high-quality early learning.

## Appendix

### History and context

NAEYC released its original position statement on developmentally appropriate practice in the mid-1980s in response to two specific issues. First, as the number of public prekindergarten programs began to grow rapidly, so too did concerns about inappropriate teaching practices and expectations for preschool and kindergarten children. Second, NAEYC had recently launched its national accreditation system for early care and education programs. While the accreditation criteria<sup>72</sup> frequently referenced the term “developmentally appropriate,” initial program visits quickly revealed wide variation in how the term was interpreted. The original statement on developmentally appropriate practice focused on 4- and 5-year-olds<sup>73</sup> but was soon expanded to address birth through age 8.<sup>74</sup> Both statements helped to build consensus on the meaning of the term within the field and provided a definition for educators to share with families, policymakers, and others.

NAEYC has regularly updated and reaffirmed its position statement on developmentally appropriate practice,<sup>75</sup> and the term continues to be widely used within and beyond the early childhood field. Each edition has reflected the context and research of its time, striving to correct common misinterpretations and to disseminate current understandings based on emerging science and professional knowledge.

In many ways, the overriding issue that drove the adoption of the original statement remains. Far too few young children, birth through age 8, consistently participate in high-quality early childhood experiences that optimally promote their development and learning. Teaching practices and expectations for young children too often do not reflect the most advanced science regarding creating an effective match between the learning environment and the learner in early childhood education settings.<sup>76</sup> Although there has been considerable progress in building public understanding and support for the importance of the early childhood years, a consistent professional framework—across all roles and settings in which early childhood educators work—remains to be implemented. The lack of a shared, consistent professional framework has meant that many educators working with children birth through age 8 are neither effectively prepared nor adequately compensated. It also has contributed to inappropriate instructional practices and expectations for children, by many educators as well as by administrators, families, and the public at large. Additionally, since the statement was last revised a decade ago, new information and understandings prompt the need to update the definition of the term and to correct misinterpretations that have led to its misuse.

Notably, over the past few years, the Power to the Profession initiative (P2P) has established a unified framework that defines a strong, diverse, and effective early childhood profession. As one part of the framework, new [professional standards and competencies](#) have been defined ([link](#)). These standards and competencies set forth expectations for what all early childhood educators should know and be able to do; they also define key responsibilities across multiple levels of the profession. This work is now moving toward implementation through federal and state policy initiatives.

When NAEYC published its first position statement on developmentally appropriate practice, there were very few national groups focused on early childhood education. Since then, the number of organizations and initiatives, both public and private, in this space has grown exponentially. NAEYC is proud to collaborate with these partners to advance our shared goals for children, families, and the early childhood profession. These organizations and initiatives have also contributed to the growing knowledge base related to child development and early education. In the past five years alone, a number of influential national reports have

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

focused on child development, learning, and education, with important implications for defining high quality in early childhood education. Among them are *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*, published by the Institute of Medicine and National Research Council in 2015, three reports published between 2016 and 2018 by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine—*Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0–8*, *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*, and *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*—and *A Nation at Hope*, a 2019 report by the Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development. Each of these reports provides an extensive literature review that helped to inform the updates to this statement.

### Reframing “best” practice

Unlike previous editions, this revision purposefully does not use the term “best practice.” Rather, quality practices informed by evidence, research, and professional judgement are referred to as guidelines for early childhood educators’ professional practice and are directly aligned to the Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators ([link](#)). This reframing reflects the concern that, especially when applied to specific practices, “best” has often been used to reflect the historically dominant culture’s assumptions without sufficient consideration of the wide variation in individual, social, and cultural contexts. Educators who rely on the notion of a single “best” practice often make assumptions based on their own experiences, which may not have involved extensive experiences with a variety of populations. These assumptions can be biased if they do not fully consider the specific abilities, interests, experiences, and motivations of a particular child or their family’s culture, preferences, values, and child-rearing practices when determining the most appropriate practice for that child.

This point highlights the complexity of the decision-making process that early childhood educators must engage in each day for each child. Educators must be able to gather the information needed from the child and family to determine the most appropriate practice, articulate why it was chosen, and continue to be open to gathering new information—from the child, family, and the professional community—to assess its success and reflect on what adaptations may be needed moving forward. In this sense, “best” practice does not represent a single practice; what’s best is a dynamic and creative set of practices that embrace and build on the varied assets children bring to the learning community.

The nature of children’s skills and abilities, experiences, languages (including dialects), and cultures is likely to vary greatly within any single group of young children and over time. Early childhood educators must have an extensive repertoire of skills and a dynamic knowledge base to make decisions, sometimes balancing what at first appear to be contradictory demands, in order to address this wide range of diversity. This concept is not new to developmentally appropriate practice (described as “both/and” approaches to decision making in the 1996 and 2009 editions), but we highlight it here in an effort to reduce the continued misuse of developmentally appropriate practice, in which dominant-culture perspectives are equated to “best” practice.

### Continuity and change in this revision

In many ways, this revision affirms the core concepts of developmentally appropriate practice, with relatively few changes since the 1996 edition. At the same time, this revised statement marks a profound departure requiring significant changes in current professional understanding and practice. How can both statements be true? First, NAEYC continues to underscore three core considerations in developmentally

## PROPOSED FINAL DRAFT – NOT FOR CITATION

appropriate practice—the knowledge that educators must rely on as they intentionally make decisions each day to guide children’s learning and development toward challenging yet achievable goals. These include (1) knowledge of principles of **child development and learning** that enable early childhood educators to make general predictions about what experiences are likely to be most enriching for children; (2) knowledge about **each child as an individual** and the implications for how best to effectively adapt and be responsive to individual variation; and (3) knowledge about the **social and cultural contexts in which each child lives**—including family and community values, expectations, and linguistic conventions—that educators must strive to understand in order to ensure that learning experiences in the program or school are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for each child and family.

In the past, differences in social and cultural contexts were identified as deficits and gaps rather than assets or strengths to be built upon. Additionally, the implications of the educator’s personal and professional social and cultural contexts and of the program setting have largely been ignored. This revised statement reflects an equity lens that underscores these two important aspects in the revised core considerations:

- The principles of child development and learning acknowledge the critical role of social and cultural contexts and the fact that there is greater variation among the “universals” of development than previously recognized.
- Understanding of the social and cultural contexts applies not only to children but also to educators and to the program setting. It is essential to recognize that educators and administrators bring their own social and cultural contexts to bear in their decision making, and they must be aware of the implications of their contexts and associated biases—both implicit and explicit—to avoid taking actions that harm rather than support each child’s learning and development.

These changes are especially important given the growing racial, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the population. They are also consistent with the NAEYC position statement on advancing equity in early childhood education [\(link\)](#) and are reflected in the revised principles of child development and learning and guidelines for practice within this position statement.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Power to the Profession 2019

<sup>2</sup> Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators 2019. ([link](#))

<sup>3</sup> See NAEYC’s position statement on [Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education](#) for further discussion.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Pre-kindergarten Task Force. (2017). The current state of scientific knowledge on pre-kindergarten effects. Brookings & Duke Center for Child and Family Policy. Retrieved from [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/duke\\_prekstudy\\_final\\_4-4-17\\_hires.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/duke_prekstudy_final_4-4-17_hires.pdf); Cannon, J. S., Kilburn, M. R., Karoly, L.A., Mattox, T., Muchow, A.N. & Buenaventura, M. (2017). Investing early: Taking stock of outcomes and economic returns from early childhood programs. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

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<sup>5</sup> How People Learn II.

<sup>6</sup> Souto-Manning, Mariana and Ayesha Rabadi-Raol. 2018. “(Re)Centering Quality in Early Childhood Education: Toward Intersectional Justice for Minoritized Children.” *Review of Research in Education*. 42(1)203 – 225. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18759550>

<sup>7</sup> Cabrera, N. “Minority Children and Their Families: A Positive Look.” In *Being Black is not a risk factor: A Strengths-Based Look at the State of the Black Child*. 2013. Ed. National Black Child Development Institute. Washington, DC: Author, 4–7.

<sup>8</sup> Pérez, Michelle Salazar & Saavedra, Cinthya. 2017. A Call for Onto-Epistemological Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Care: Centering Global South Conceptualizations of Childhood/s. *Review of Research in Education*, 41(1), 1-29.

<sup>9</sup> Keller, H. 2018. Universality claim of attachment theory: Children’s socioemotional development across cultures, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 10.1073/pnas.1720325115, (201720325).

<sup>10</sup> *How People Learn II*.

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