



## Advance Developmentally Appropriate Practice: How Young Children Learn

### WHAT IS DAP?

Educational effectiveness in early childhood education requires educators to meet children where they are to support them in their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Best practice for early childhood education (birth through age nine), known as developmentally appropriate practice or DAP, are based on knowledge – not assumptions – of how children learn and develop.<sup>1</sup> Developmentally appropriate practice serves as a framework and philosophical approach for teaching young children, rather than a curriculum or rigid set of standards that dictate practice.<sup>2</sup>

Child-centered DAP goals embrace children’s individual differences, encourage active learning, and promote deep understanding.<sup>3</sup> This comprehensive approach addresses the interrelatedness of the developmental domains (cognitive, social, emotional, and physical) and stresses the relationship between emotional and social factors and children’s academic ability. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) notes DAP includes considerations for child development and learning as well as knowing what is individually appropriate and culturally important.<sup>4</sup>

### PLAYING TO LEARN

Early experiences are cumulative and enhance competence for future experiences.<sup>5</sup> Brain science suggests the brain of a child from ages three through 10 is more than twice as active as the brain of an adult. During these years, children master basic skills to lay the scaffolding for developing more complex skills.<sup>6</sup> As brain plasticity develops, time should be devoted to imaginative, multi-sensory, and playful learning. Children need to have multiple opportunities for personal, meaningful play experiences to build background knowledge, imagination, and rational thought before they are ready for more complex academic skills.<sup>7</sup>

DAP acknowledges the role of play in children’s learning and development. Play intrinsically motivates children, allowing them to create their own goals and rules. During play children focus attention on the means not just a particular end – engaging in a process-oriented rather than product-oriented learning experience.<sup>8</sup> Children authentically learn through play; they feel most comfortable in an environment where they can use their senses to play, experiment, and learn.<sup>9</sup>

## HEALTHY CHILD DEVELOPMENT: BENEFITS OF DAP AND PLAY

Children engage in various kinds of play, defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) as physical play, object play, pretend or dramatic play, constructive play, and games with rules. Children work hard when they play; it is the primary way children use language and math concepts.<sup>10</sup> Research shows that children who engage in complex forms of socio-dramatic play have greater language skills, social skills, more empathy, more imagination, less aggressive behaviors, show more self-control and higher levels of thinking.<sup>11</sup> Play fosters creativity, the number one leadership competency reported by an IBM survey of 1,500 CEOs.<sup>12</sup>

Dramatic play helps children to develop executive functioning which includes the ability to self-regulate. Research predicts learning self-regulation in the early years leads to later functioning in areas such as problem-solving, planning, focused attention, and metacognition.<sup>13</sup> Children with good self-regulation develop the ability to control emotions, behaviors, and impulses.<sup>14</sup>

Play provides opportunities for children to build confidence, reduce stress, explore feelings, test limits, learn to share, and form relationships with peers. Play promotes resilience, compassion, sense of responsibility, and the capacity to solve problems.<sup>15</sup>

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

The HighScope Preschool Curriculum Comparison Study (PCCS) showed long term benefits of child-centered, play education – demonstrating the potential impact early learning experiences have on children throughout their lives. The study randomly assigned sixty-eight children from low-income families to one of three preschool classes: (1) a direct instruction program (DI); (2) a traditional nursery school where children learned through play and large group activities; and (3) a HighScope program where children learned through group time and play. Findings demonstrated problems in development for the DI participants, following them through age twenty-three. Nearly half of the DI participants received special education services compared to only 6% of those in the child-initiated, play classrooms. Less than 10% of participants in the child-initiated, play classrooms had been arrested for a felony offense compared to 34% of the DI participants. Participants in the child-initiated play classrooms reported never being suspended from work, whereas over a quarter of their peers in the DI classroom had been suspended.<sup>16</sup>

## CRISIS IN EARLY EDUCATION

Federal, state, and local policies emphasize accountability and assessments which leads school districts to increase direct instruction at the expense of play and developmentally appropriate practice. Teachers, pediatricians, and others who work with young children have expressed concern about children's physical and mental well-being if play is eliminated from their daily life. DAP ensures child development and learning focuses on what children typically will and will not be capable of, and what strategies will most likely promote their optimal learning and development.<sup>17</sup>

The call for DAP arises from the ongoing crisis in early childhood education: the discrepancy between what is happening in the classroom with our youngest children versus what we know is best for child development and learning. The culture of academic rigor and accountability creates a perception that learning only occurs when children receive direct instruction using, for example, teacher-led lessons, worksheets, and flashcards.

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO ADVANCE DAP

DAP consists of the motivational, cultural, social, and emotional skills as well as cognitive skills. Academic rigor and DAP coexist through hands-on learning, connecting to real world experiences, and providing multiple opportunities for children to gain knowledge and skills.<sup>18</sup> Rigorous, enriching, developmentally appropriate early learning experiences prepare children for future learning and success.<sup>19</sup> Classroom expectations, rules, and practices that are developmentally appropriate are more likely to create a positive learning environment for young children. We must also consider DAP when developing policies and strategies for addressing children's behavior. A white paper focused on the prevention and reduction of suspensions and expulsions across early childhood settings is forthcoming.

As increased direct instruction may push out meaningful play experiences in early childhood classrooms, we need to find ways for policy and funding to support developmentally appropriate practice. Trying Together calls on educators, policymakers, and families to support a paradigm shift that strengthens the role of play in early childhood education. The following recommendations propose policies and practices to support developmentally appropriate practice and play in children's early education experiences.

### 1. Require early childhood content in principal licensing and training.

Research suggests principals have the second largest in-school impact after teachers - yet many new elementary principals lack adequate knowledge of child development and appropriate practices for teaching young children.<sup>20</sup> Considering the role of principals in student growth, it is essential they acquire the knowledge to most effectively work with young children and feel confident to provide instructional guidance to early educators. The problem can be addressed by requiring principal preparation programs to incorporate more content related to early learning and development.

Illinois is the only state to explicitly include early childhood content and field experience in principal licensing requirements.<sup>21</sup> Currently, Pennsylvania offers the Early Childhood Executive Leadership (ECEL) Institute as one of two curriculums through the Principal Inspired Leaders program. The program is designed for elementary school principals and early education center directors to come together in support of a continuous, aligned birth through grade three system.

The Pennsylvania consolidated state plan for the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA), submitted for approval to the U.S. Department of Education in September 2017, highlights opportunities for

educators to pursue leadership. One of the goals for supporting successful transitions to kindergarten includes early learning training for new elementary school principals. Elementary school principals may not always come from an early childhood background, therefore, training in child development and ensuring pathways to leadership for early childhood educators is important.<sup>22</sup>

## 2. Establish a professional learning system for birth through grade three educators.

The knowledge, decisions, and actions of teachers directly impact children's experiences in the classroom. Effective teaching in the early grades requires content knowledge of child development - a deep understanding of developmentally appropriate expectations, knowing the way young children think and behave, and why.<sup>23</sup> Teacher licensing and training must include classes on early childhood development in both traditional educator preparation at institutions of higher education and alternative route certification programs. Experts suggest that state teacher licensing structures align with developmental science and suggest narrower licenses - like Pennsylvania's current PreK-4 license rather than a broader K-6 license. Teacher licensing rules impact how teachers are trained including whether they receive classes in early childhood development.<sup>24</sup>

The New America 2017 Education Policy Agenda suggests a professional learning system that links early childhood teachers (birth through age five) with teachers in the early grades (K-3) – highlighting the significance of teacher-to-teacher interaction and collaboration.<sup>25</sup> Creating a professional learning system for educators in birth through third grade will provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate with colleagues, discuss and observe best practices, and participate in meaningful professional development.<sup>26</sup> Title II, Part A of the federal ESSA law supports opportunities for joint professional learning and planning activities for school staff and educators in preschool programs that address the transition to elementary school. Partnerships between early learning providers and schools support successful transitions and allow for teachers to share developmentally appropriate practices across grade levels.<sup>27</sup>

## 3. Emphasize positive interactions in teacher observations.

Research suggests that the social and academic gains of young children are most significantly associated with meaningful back and forth engagement with teachers.<sup>28</sup> As stakeholders convene to operationalize the concept of an effective educator as defined in the Pennsylvania state ESSA plan, early childhood educators and advocates must be represented at the table. Definitions and evaluations of early childhood educators must include observations of the quality of interactions between teachers and students, as well as the use of DAP and play through lesson plans, instructions, implementation, and classroom activities.

## 4. Create a recess policy.

Recess is an important part of the school day for young children, giving them time to plan their own games and the freedom to play. However, since the enactment of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB), 20% of school districts decreased recess time, averaging about 50 minutes a week.<sup>29</sup> In addition to recess,

children need physical activity breaks throughout the day. Movement in and out of the classroom helps improve behavior and attention.

Currently in Pennsylvania there is no general physical activity requirement, nor is there a policy requiring or recommending recess or physical activity breaks. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America) released a report on strategies and policy recommendations for recess. These recommendations include state policies and local strategies such as (1) designating how many minutes of free play time children have per school day, (2) encouraging schools to write recess policy including designated space for indoor and outdoor recess, (3) identifying the roles of teachers, other staff, and parent volunteers, and (4) tracking data on recess.<sup>30</sup>

## 5. Educate and engage families.

Families are children's first teachers. Educating families around developmentally appropriate expectations for how young children learn and what should occur in the classroom can help them support teachers in implementing DAP. Engaging families in the learning process leads to positive outcomes for children in multiple domains, including literacy and language, social and emotional development, and cognition.<sup>31</sup> Families provide guidance for their children's learning in and out of the classroom; therefore, the knowledge of child development, DAP, and the importance of play in early learning must be communicated with families.

## 6. Conduct more research that highlights the benefits of play.

Play is a central component in developmentally appropriate educational practices. However, the current trends in early education have led to a decrease in playful experiences and an emphasis on developmentally inappropriate methods of academic instruction and standardized testing that undermine the learning and development of young children. A growing body of research establishes relationships between play and development in several areas – language, math, scientific thinking, and social and emotional skills. To deepen our understanding, more research is needed to investigate why play promotes learning and development.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, further research needs to examine the long-term impacts of play, including the associations between DAP in educational settings and social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development of children.

## SOURCES

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