



Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP): A Guide for Caregivers of Infants and Toddlers

DAP is the approach early care and education professionals use to teach your young child.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice:

- is grounded in research on how young children learn;
- provides connection to real-world experiences and opportunities to gain knowledge and skills through hands-on learning;
- prepares children for future learning; and
- acknowledges the role of play in learning and development.

FACT: All children, including babies, learn through play. Play is an important way that young children bond with their caregivers; develop cognitive, physical, social, and emotional skills; and build an understanding of the world around them.

- Regularly touching, talking, and responding to your child's sounds and needs will solidify the bond between you and your child. Look your baby in the eyes, sing songs to them, and interact with them regularly through play activities.
- A simple game of peekaboo not only leaves your baby giggling and smiling, but it also provides a chance for children to make eye contact with their caregiver; practice their arm and head movements; and learn that even if a person or object disappears from their view, it still exists somewhere else.
- Keep track of your child's development by using a milestone checklist. An example can be found on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <https://bit.ly/cdc-milestone-list>



FACT: Starting from birth, meaningful play experiences help your child build background knowledge, imagination, and rational thought that enables academic skill development. In fact, play is the primary way your child uses language and math concepts.

- As an infant or toddler, your child is taking in new sights, sounds, smells, and sensations. Broaden your child's horizon by taking a stroll through nature, narrating what you see, smell, hear, and feel during the journey. This will expose your baby to new vocabulary through a positive outdoor experience.
- Support your child's ability to make choices that interest them as a way to guide their math and literacy skills. Start by providing multiple book and activity options to your child and let them choose the one they are interested in.
- Find a playful way to introduce math concepts. For example, you can use healthy food items like apple slices, grapes, or raisins to introduce concepts of adding, subtracting, and grouping during snack time. Use words like more, less, first, after, rectangle, circle, heavier, and other common math terms.



FACT: In addition to learning skills like counting and speaking in sentences, it's important for children to practice social, emotional, and physical skills that support their future success inside and outside of the classroom.

- With supervision, give your baby their own spoon at meal time or give them a child-safe bowl and spoon to play with. You can also give your baby blocks and balls to strengthen their grip, practice their holding skills, and improve dexterity.
- Be expressive with your face and make eye contact with your child. This will teach them different social expressions that help with non-verbal communication. Use your eyes and hands to point to something to teach the child how to follow other people's cues. You can also introduce your child to the names of emotions during this time.
- Encourage social skill development by providing opportunities for your child to meet and play with family members, friends, and caregivers. This allows children to develop relationships with people other than the parent or primary caregiver and helps build feelings of trust.



FACT: While caregiver-child play is important, unsupervised child-led play helps children become independent and make decisions.

- Provide opportunities for your child to practice sharing, teamwork, creativity, and independence by inviting other children over for a playdate (when possible). Gather a box of household items like clothes, child-safe dishes, books, and more and let the children determine how they will use them.
- Introduce your child to new items and materials. Let them touch the items and work to figure out what they do and how they work. If your child is expressing frustration, provide them with a quick demonstration or how-to. After that, let your child take the lead and try it out themselves.
- Include times throughout the day where your child must direct their own play. In a safe environment (preferably a location with a baby monitor), leave your child unattended with child-safe play items for a short period of time. Monitor how your child handles the situation and if they play with the items. Each time you leave, stay away for a bit longer to encourage the development of self-regulation skills.



In DAP environments, children will:

Create rather than duplicate.

Move rather than wait.

Attempt to solve their own problems rather than wait for an adult to solve them.

Speak rather than listen passively.

Explore their interests rather than just learning what an adult thinks they should learn.

Make choices rather than just being told what to do.

Make their own lines instead of coloring within pre-made lines.

Write their own books rather than fill in workbooks.

Create art rather than do pre-planned crafts.

Learn through experience rather than through repeating the same action multiple times.

Appreciate the process rather than the end product.

Ask questions and figure out the answers themselves.

Learn interesting information and use meaningful skills.

Follow a schedule based on their needs.

(Adapted from "The Butterfly Garden" by Sandra Crosse)