

NAEYC Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice: 2019

Note to Reviewers:

This is an initial draft without citations; these will be incorporated in the subsequent draft.

Comments and feedback may be provided by:

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NAEYC Position Statement

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Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) is practice that promotes each and every child’s optimal learning and development. It is grounded in the research on child development and learning, in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness in early care and education, and in the knowledge that professional early childhood educators glean from their observations of and interactions with children and their families. Consistently engaging in DAP requires deep professional knowledge and skills, intentional effort, and adequate resources (such as strong curricula and time for ongoing professional learning). This position statement on DAP—NAEYC’s fourth edition—provides an overview of the essentials of DAP, grounding the profession and policy makers in the latest research and laying out a path for all children to reach their full potential.

History and context

NAEYC released its original position statement on developmentally appropriate practice in the mid-1980s in response to two specific concerns. 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 (NAEYC 1984) frequently referenced the term “developmentally appropriate,” initial program visits quickly revealed wide variation in how the term was interpreted. The original DAP statement focused on 4- and 5-year-olds (NAEYC 1986) but was soon expanded to address birth through age 8. (NAEYC 1987). 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, policy makers, and others.

NAEYC has regularly updated and reaffirmed its DAP position statement (NAEYC 1996; 2009), 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 receive high-quality early childhood experiences that optimally promote their development and learning across all domains of development and content areas of 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 (citations). Although there has been considerable progress in building public understanding and support for the importance of the early childhood years, a consistent professional framework—implemented 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 appropriately compensated. It also has contributed to inappropriate instructional practices and expectations for children, by many

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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. 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 DAP, there were very few national groups focused on early childhood care and 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 four years alone, a number of influential national reports have focused on child development, learning, and education with important implications for defining high quality in early childhood education, among them *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Foundation*, (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council 2015 hereafter TWF); *Parenting Matters: Supporting Parents of Children Ages 0–8* (NASEM 2016); *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures* (NASEM 2017); *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures* (NASEM 2018 hereafter HPLII), and *A Nation of Hope* (Aspen Institute National Commission on Social, Emotional, and Academic Development 2019). Each of these reports provides an extensive literature review that has helped to inform this current statement.

Purpose

NAEYC is committed to periodically revising its definition of developmentally appropriate practice, based on a synthesis of current research and practice-based knowledge. This statement provides the conceptual underpinnings that support NAEYC's other foundational position statements, including the (1) [Professional Standards and Competencies](#) for Early Childhood Educators, (2) [Code of Ethical Conduct](#), (3) [Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education](#) (link to come), and (4) [NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards](#) (link to come). It also reflects the growing evidence base that supports the complex decision-making early childhood educators engage in daily, reinforces the critical importance of implementing P2P, and demonstrates the need to ensure enough funding for programs to recruit and retain qualified early childhood educators.

In this position statement, NAEYC defines “developmentally appropriate practice” and identifies a set of principles of child development and learning. We provide general descriptions of these principles in practice, and we identify specific policies needed to support educators in implementing these practices. The definition, principles, and descriptions underscore a broad definition of development that recognizes the social, cultural, and historical context in which learning occurs and the implications of that context not only for all children but also for educators, administrators, and others involved in any aspect of the early childhood education system.

Statement of the position

Early childhood educators have a professional obligation 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 (Power to the Profession, 2019).

Developmentally appropriate practices are the result of intentional decisions that early childhood educators and other professionals make to promote the optimal development and learning of each and every child served. These decisions are grouped in five broad categories: 1) creating a caring, equitable community of learners; 2) establishing respectful, reciprocal partnerships with families and communities; 3) observing, documenting and assessing children’s development and learning; 4) teaching to enhance each child’s development and learning; and 5) planning and implementing an engaging curriculum to meet meaningful goals. Guidelines for putting DAP in action across each of these categories and an added category for professionalism begin on page 13.

For the purpose of this position statement, NAEYC defines “**development**” broadly to include all aspects that contribute to children’s learning—including their abilities and disabilities, social identities (race, ethnicity, gender, among others), cultural and familial experiences, interests, motivations, languages—all of which reflect deeply personal interpretations that children construct within specific social and cultural contexts (citations). This broad view of development responds specifically to important criticisms of prior DAP statements (citations); a central point in these criticisms has been that development was assumed to refer to developmental stages that were theorized primarily on the basis of data on children without disabilities from white, middle- and upper-class, educated, monolingual families. NAEYC states unequivocally: practices that are not culturally or linguistically appropriate for a particular child are by definition *not* developmentally appropriate.

A related area of revision and clarification deals with the definition of “**appropriate**.” The workgroup and committee responsible for preparing this statement identified multiple challenges to this term, and specifically its value-laden nature, including that it has reflected and reinforced normative views of the dominant culture (citations). NAEYC specifically states that “appropriate” must be considered from the vantage of each and every child. Thus, any practice or setting that does not optimally support a particular child’s development and learning across all domains and content areas is *not* developmentally appropriate. Any approach that places a child’s emotional well-being at risk because it undermines any aspect of a child’s identity or a particular family cultural value is *not* developmentally appropriate.

Stated positively, developmentally appropriate practices recognize each and every child as someone who brings multiple assets as a unique individual and as a family and community member. Developmentally appropriate practices recognize and build on these assets to promote each and every child’s optimal growth across all domains of development and the foundations of all content areas of learning.

Moving away from “best” practice

This revision purposefully moves away from the term “best” practice, acknowledging that too often the term reflects the historically dominant culture’s interpretation and does not sufficiently consider the nuances that can affect decision making given the wide variation in individual, social, and cultural contexts. Moving away from the terminology of “best practice” does *not*, however, mean moving away from using the best-available empirical evidence and wisdom of practice on which to base decision making. It does acknowledge

that the same approach will not be the best choice for each child. For example, the DEC Recommended Practices (2014) are based on the foundational principles of developmentally appropriate practice, but are designed to recognize that young children who have or are at risk for developmental delays/disabilities often need more specialized practices that allow them to participate and engage meaningfully in their daily living routines and learning activities.

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

Educators who rely on the notion of a single “best” practice often make those 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 and family as assets 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—and the importance of being able to gather the information needed from the child and family to determine the most appropriate practice, articulate why it was chosen, and to continue gathering information from the child and family to assess its success and reflect on what adaptations may be needed moving forward.

Core considerations in developmentally appropriate practice

When making decisions that result in developmentally appropriate practice, early childhood educators must gain or seek out knowledge and understanding in three areas. These core considerations apply to all aspects of educators’ work with young children.

1. What is known about the processes of child development and learning in general, including how these processes occur within specific social, cultural, and historical contexts.

An increasing body of research evidence documents the tremendous growth of children’s learning and development that occurs from birth through age 8 across all domains of development and that is foundational for all academic subject areas (citations). Including both what is known about general processes of children’s development and learning as well as the educational practices educators need to fully support development and learning in all areas, this extensive knowledge base is outlined more fully in the Early Childhood Professional Standards and Competencies. It is also summarized in the principles of development and learning below.

This knowledge base is constantly evolving, and a key area of change is the growing understanding that child development and learning—actually, human development and learning—are always embedded within a social and cultural context (HPLII). Too often in both professional preparation and practice, principles of child development and learning and expectations of student-teacher roles have primarily reflected norms based on a Western European, highly educated perspective (HPLII). As noted earlier, this has also been a criticism of previous editions of DAP. This normative focus has tended to treat differences as deficits and,

unintentionally perhaps, helped to perpetuate systems of power and privilege and maintained structural inequities whose effects can no longer be ignored.

To support each child's optimal development and learning in an increasingly diverse society, early childhood educators must understand the implications of the social and cultural context on learning and development. They must recognize that children's experiences vary by their social identities (for example, by race/ethnicity, language, gender, class, ability/disability, family composition, economic status, among others), with different and intersecting impacts on development and learning. They must affirm and support positive development of each aspect of each child's identity, for example, the child's languages and cultures, racial identity (including for those who are white), and gender identity. They must create equitable learning opportunities for all children with and without disabilities. Because the professional knowledge base is evolving in this regard, early childhood educators must also be aware of the limitations of their professional preparation and be committed to continuing their professional development, including by learning from the families and communities they serve.

With the understanding of importance of the social, cultural, and historical contexts of development and learning, early childhood educators can use their professional knowledge to make general predictions about children's abilities and interests, and the strategies and approaches that will most likely promote their optimal development and learning. They can also make preliminary decisions about the learning environment, materials, interactions and activities they want to prepare for children. At the same time, they also understand the limitations of applying these generalities to individual children, and they are aware of the potential for these preliminary decisions to reflect their own assumptions and biases based on their experiences (citations). Thus, they are prepared to gather additional information to guide their decision making for each specific group and for each child with whom they are working.

2. What is known about each child as an individual—specific information about each child, within the context of their family and community, which has implications for how best to be support their development and learning.

Early childhood educators have the responsibility of getting to know each child well, not only as an individual but also as a family and community member. Educators use a variety of methods—including by using their own knowledge of the community, seeking information from the family, observing the child, examining the child's work, and using authentic and appropriate individual child assessments. Educators recognize 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, preferences; their personalities, motivation, and approaches to learning; and their knowledge, skills, and abilities based on their cultural experiences, including different home languages and dialects. Children may have disabilities or other individual learning needs (including needs for accelerated learning); sometimes these have been diagnosed and sometimes they have not.

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

3. What is known about the social and cultural contexts affecting the delivery of early childhood education and care.

One of the key differences in this revision is to expand the core consideration regarding social and cultural contexts beyond those of each child to also consider the social and cultural contexts of early childhood educators and of the program or school setting. While it remains important for educators to seek information from families and communities to better understand the social and cultural context for each child, it is equally important for early childhood educators and others to understand that they themselves, and the school or program setting as a whole, are part of a broader societal context in which implicit and explicit biases are endemic.

Early childhood educators must seek to understand this societal context, its inherent biases and inequitable distribution of power and privilege, and the ways in which these historical and current inequities have shaped them and the early childhood profession, as they have shaped our nation. Inequities reflect differential treatment of individuals based on race, class, culture, gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, ability/disability, languages, religion, indigenous heritage, and other identities. They are rooted in our nation's social, political, economic, and educational structures. Precisely because these biases are both individual and institutional, addressing structural inequities requires attention to both *interpersonal* dynamics—the day-to-day relationships and interactions at the core of early childhood education practice—and *systemic* influences—the uneven distribution of power and privilege inherent in public and private systems nationwide, including early care and education systems. Readers are referred to NAEYC's position statement on advancing equity in early childhood education for a fuller discussion of these issues and specific recommendations for ensuring equitable learning opportunities for all children. This recognition is important for all educators, but especially those who teach children whose social identities differ from their own. As Sonia Nieto noted in a recent keynote at an NAEYC conference, "All children deserve to have their culture affirmed [by their educators and caregivers]. For some children it happens daily and automatically; for others, it takes conscious effort.

It can be very difficult for members of a dominant culture to recognize the extent to which their practices and expectations are cultural in nature because they are so deeply embedded (). Cultural variations directly impact formal education, such as differences in deference to authority figures, making eye contact, or seeking or avoiding being singled out for praise. The context of early childhood education also reflects the fact that US political culture has traditionally focused on narrow measures of accountability for public education, often using standardized achievement measures that reflect and maintain systems of inequity rather than addressing systemic inequities in opportunities (citations). Traditional instructional models, especially in elementary schools, have emphasized rigid, scripted curricula with little flexibility for educators to make adaptations to better serve individual children. Teacher-directed activities predominate in many classrooms, especially those serving children deemed "at risk," as children are expected to sit quietly and complete seatwork on their own (citations). High-stakes accountability measures have led to a "push-down" of curriculum, narrowly based on skills assumed necessary to succeed on later tests (citations). In general, this culture has tended to favor white girls, who are more likely to be socialized to sit and listen, and children with more educated family members (citations). The focus on school readiness has emphasized whether children meet the entry expectations of the school, rather than whether schools are preparing each child by providing equitable learning opportunities for all.

There is some indication that this culture is beginning to change, as reflected in the replacement of the federal No Child Left Behind Act with the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), and highly publicized reports that stress concepts for public education that have long been the hallmark of early childhood education. For example, 21st Century Skills frameworks emphasize collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, and problem solving, and *A Nation at Hope* (2019) underscores the importance of fully integrating social, emotional and academic development. Still, much more remains to be done to address broader inequities that affect child development and learning and to ensure equitable learning opportunities for every child.

No discussion of the context of early childhood care and learning is complete without acknowledging the inequities that exist for early childhood educators and in the delivery system of services. Currently, educators often have the same responsibilities yet receive very different compensation across age groups and work settings (citations). These inequities are especially apparent for educators of color and immigrants who are more likely to work with infants and toddlers (citations). Despite recent increases in funding for child care and early education services, access to high quality settings remains limited, especially for infants and toddlers.

Principles of child development and learning and their implications for practice

As in previous editions of this statement, the following principles reflect a synthesis of theory and research about how young children develop and learn and their implications for early childhood professional practice. These principles are interrelated, making it challenging for a linear list to do justice to their overall complexity. These principles reflect an extensive research base that is only partially referenced here (for more information, see TWF, HPLII, Promising Futures, Nation of Hope).

1. Learning and development are dynamic processes that reflect the complex interplay between a child's biological maturation and 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 (citations).

Neural connections—which are essential for all thought, communication, and learning— are established most rapidly in early childhood. (citations). The processes of forming new connections and pruning connections that are not used continue throughout the lifespan but are most consequential in the first three years (citations). 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 (citation). When an infant's caregivers persistently fail to provide this type of responsive care, the infant experiences chronic stress that not only negatively impacts brain development but also can impair other systems, including immunologic functions, the development of stress and coping abilities, and the development of core cognitive functions like memory, learning and thinking (citations). Adversity, such as living in poverty, also can generate chronic stress that can negatively affect the development of brain areas associated with cognitive and self-regulatory functions (citations). The interplay of maturation and environment continues through the preschool years and primary grades, with the same negative implications of chronic stress and adversity (citations).

Some children appear to be more susceptible to the effects of environmental influence—both positive and negative—than others, reflecting individual differences at play (citations). The buffering effects of caring, consistent relationships for children facing adverse circumstances, including trauma, is also important to note (citations). This emerging science emphasizes the critical importance of early childhood educators in providing responsive, sensitive care to promote children’s development and learning across the full birth through age 8 period.

2. All domains of child development and early learning are important; each domain both supports and is supported by the others.

Domains of development can be grouped in different ways; NAEYC follows the organization used in TWF: cognitive development, socioemotional development, physical development and health; and general learning competencies (insert Table 1). General learning competencies include general cognitive skills including attention, memory, cognitive self-regulation, executive functioning, reasoning, and problem solving as well as learning skills and dispositions (also called approaches to learning.) These include initiative, curiosity, motivation, engagement, and persistence.

Teaching young children well involves fostering their development and learning in all these domains. There is considerable overlap and interaction across each domain. For example, sound nutrition and enough sleep promote children’s abilities to engage in social interactions that in turn stimulate cognitive growth. Children who experience predictable, responsive interactions with adults also tend to demonstrate improved general learning competencies, including better self-regulation and executive functioning (citations).

Changes in one domain often impact other areas and highlights 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 their further language development regardless of which language(s) or dialect(s) they speak.

A growing body of work demonstrates the relationship between social and emotional competencies and academic competencies (citation), and thus the importance of all these areas in educating young children. Just as academic skills and competencies can be supported through intentional teaching strategies, so too can social and emotional skills and competencies (citation). Moreover, the combination of cognitive, emotional, and social and interpersonal skills and competencies better prepare children for rigorous academic content and learning experiences (Nation of Hope). In brief, the knowledge base documents the importance of a comprehensive curriculum and the interrelatedness of the developmental domains in children’s well-being and success (citations).

3. Although general progressions of development and learning can be specified, differences due to cultural contexts, experiences, and individual variation must be also 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 with age for children to combine simple routines into more complex strategies (citations). Despite these predictable

changes in all domains, the ways that these changes are demonstrated, and the meaning attached to them, will vary in different cultural and linguistic contexts. For example, children in some cultures are encouraged to satisfy their growing curiosity by moving independently to explore the environment, while in other cultures, children might be socialized to seek answers to queries within structured activities created for them by adults. In addition, all children learn language through their social interactions, but there are important distinctions in the process for monolingual and bilingual children (citations). Rather than assuming the process typical of monolingual children is the norm against which others are judged (as many have been previously taught), it is important for educators to recognize the differences as variations in strengths rather than deficits and to support them appropriately.

Development and learning also occur at varying rates from child to child and at uneven rates across different areas for each child. As a result, 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 (citation). Children’s demonstrated abilities and skills are often fluid and may vary from day to day based on individual or contextual factors.

4. Children are active learners from birth, constantly taking in and organizing information to create meaning through their interactions and 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 (citations). They recognize patterns and make predictions that they then apply to new situations. Infants appear particularly attuned to look to adults as sources of information, underscoring the importance of consistent, responsive caregiving (citations). 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 as members of the adult community and to learn by pitching in (citations). In other cultures, children’s attention is captured as they are encouraged to engage in one-on-one interactions with adults. Children socialized to learn through observing may quietly watch others without asking for help, while other children 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, active exploration and play, and 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 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 advanced as their peers likely have just as much potential and capacity to learn; they need educators 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 their peer interactions. By age 3, most young children have established rudimentary definitions of their own and others’ social identities, including race and gender (citations). Early childhood educators understand the importance of creating a learning environment that affirms each child’s social identities. They are also aware of the potential for implicit bias that may prejudice

their interactions with children of various social identities (citations). Educators recognize that their nonverbal signals may influence children's attitudes toward their peers (citations). For example, some research has shown that children will think a disfluent reader is "better" or "smarter" if they see a teacher direct more positive nonverbal signals toward that child relative to a fluent reader who receives more negative nonverbal signals (citations).

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 setting.

This principle is drawn from the influential report *How People Learn II* and is supported by a growing body of research (citations). 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. This makes it 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 appropriate (citations).

Equally important is encouraging each child's sense of agency (citations). Opportunities for agency, that is, the ability to make choices about what and how activities will proceed, must be widely available for all children, and 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 (HPLII). Promoting agency by engaging children in challenging and achievable tasks that build on their interests and that they recognize as meaningful and purposeful to their lives is a powerful tool that educators can use to motivate children.

As noted earlier regarding brain development, children's feelings of safety and security are essential for the development of higher-order thinking skills in the prefrontal cortex, so fostering that sense of belonging is essentially a brain-building activity. Beginning in infancy, educators who follow children's lead in noticing their interest 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 (citations). 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.

6. Play is an important vehicle for promoting the development of content knowledge as well as self-regulation, language, cognition, and social competence; it also serves as an important means of cultural expression.

Children of all ages love to play. It gives them opportunities to develop physical competence and enjoyment of the outdoors, understand and make sense of their world, interact with others, express and control emotions, develop their symbolic and problem-solving abilities, and practice emerging skills. Research shows clear links between play and foundational capacities such as memory, self-regulation, oral language abilities, social skills, and success in school (citations).

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Children engage in various kinds of play, such as physical play, object play, pretend or dramatic play, constructive play, and games with rules. Play serves important physical, mental, emotional, and social functions for humans as well as other species, and each kind of play has its own benefits and characteristics. From infancy, children act on the world around them for the pleasure of seeing what happens, such as repeatedly dropping a spoon on the floor. At around age 2, children begin to demonstrate symbolic use of objects, such as picking up a shell and pretending to drink as from a cup—especially when they have had opportunities to observe others engaging in such make-believe behavior (citations).

From such beginnings, children begin to engage in more mature forms of dramatic play, in which by the age of 3 to 5 they may act out specific roles, interact with one another in their roles, and plan how the play will go. Such play is influential in developing self-regulation, as children are highly motivated to stick to the roles and rules of the play, and thus grow in the ability to inhibit their impulses, act in coordination with others, and make plans. High-level dramatic play produces documented cognitive, social, and emotional benefits (citations). However, with many children spending more time in adult-directed activities and media use, forms of child play characterized by imagination and rich social interactions seem to be declining (citations). Active scaffolding of imaginative play is needed in early childhood settings if children are to develop the sustained, mature dramatic play that contributes significantly to their self-regulation and other cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional benefits. Adults can use established methods to promote children's extended engagement in make-believe play as well as in games with rules and other kinds of high-level play (citations). Augmenting academic learning, such play supports the abilities that underlie academic learning and thus promote school success, including for kindergarten and primary grade children (citations).

Educators can use guided play in which they strategically support or extend children's play in support of specific learning goals (citations). Guided play allows children to direct their own play and exploration with guidance from educators who have set up the learning environment to reflect children's interests and use comments and suggestions to help children move toward a learning goal while still providing choices (citation).

Guided play gives educators opportunities to use children's interests and creations to introduce new vocabulary, model complex language, and provide children with multiple opportunities to use words in context. These meaningful and engaging experiences help children—including those in kindergarten and the primary grades—build knowledge and vocabulary across subject areas rather than in isolation much more effectively than through rote memorization of word lists or flashcards (citations).

Kindergarten educators have lamented the removal of blocks and dramatic play materials from their classroom (citations), let alone in the primary grades. They understand that highly didactic, highly controlling curriculum found in many kindergarten and primary grades, with a narrow focus on test-focused skill development, is unlikely to be engaging or meaningful for children. Instead, the lesson children are likely to learn is that they are not successful learners in school. Studies have found 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 reflect on their own understanding (citations). Playful learning, skillfully supported by early childhood educators, supports learning through experience and reflection. It not only builds academic language and deepens conceptual development but also supports approaches to learning—a much more effective strategy for long-term academic success.

7. The foundations for the academic disciplines (subject matter knowledge and skills) are laid in early childhood; educators need subject-area knowledge, knowledge of the learning progressions within each discipline, and pedagogical knowledge about teaching the content effectively.

Based on their knowledge of what is meaningful and engaging to each child, educators' design of the learning environment and its activities promotes subject area knowledge across all content areas. Educators use their knowledge of developmental progressions for different subjects, as well as common conceptions and misconceptions at different points on the progressions, and their pedagogical knowledge about the subjects to develop learning activities that offer challenging but achievable goals for children and are meaningful and engaging for them. These activities will look very different for infants and toddlers than for second- and third-graders, and from one community to another given variations in culture and context, but 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 across all disciplines.

Recognizing the value of the academic disciplines, an inter-disciplinary approach that considers multiple areas together is typically more meaningful than teaching content areas separately (citations). 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" (TWF, p. 249). 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.

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. Therefore, by building knowledge of the world in early childhood, educators are laying the foundation that is critical for all future learning (How People Learn I and II). The idea that young children are not ready for academic subject matter is a misunderstanding of DAP; particularly in grades 1-3, almost all subject matter can be taught in ways that are meaningful and engaging for each child (citations).

The idea of mirrors and windows (citation) is useful for curriculum development. The curriculum should provide mirrors so that children see themselves, their families, and the 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, etc. that they would otherwise not encounter. In diverse classrooms, one child's mirrors are another child's windows, making for wonderful opportunities for collaborative learning.

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 children, are motivated to understand or do what is just beyond their current understanding or mastery. Recognizing the funds of knowledge (citation) of each child and family, early childhood educators create a rich learning environment that activates 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. Educators also recognize

the potential for implicit bias that may lead them to have lowered expectations, especially for children of color (citations), and they actively work to reduce 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 skill level. Once 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 (citations).

Children need to feel successful in new tasks a significant proportion of the time to promote their motivation and persistence (citations). Confronted by repeated failure, most children will simply stop trying. Repeated opportunity to practice and consolidate new skills and concepts is also essential for children to reach the threshold of mastery at which they can go on to use this knowledge or skill and apply it in new situations. Young children engage in a great deal of practice during play and in other child-guided contexts.

Educators must set challenging, achievable goals for all children, building on the funds of knowledge and cultural assets that children possess (citations). 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 acquiring 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 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 classroom 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 (citations).

Tiered intervention approaches can be helpful in identifying children who might benefit from additional instruction or support (citations). 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 (citations).

9. When used intentionally and appropriately, technology and interactive media are effective tools to support learning and development. Effective uses of technology and media are active, hands-on, engaging, and empowering; give the child control; provide adaptive scaffolds to help children progress in skills development at their individual rates; and are used as one of many options to support children's learning (citations). Technology and interactive media should expand children's access to new content and new skills. 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 and not on the technology (citation). Readers are

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directed to the NAEYC/FRC position statement on technology in early childhood education for more information on this topic.

DAP in action

Developmentally appropriate practice—that promotes each and every child’s optimal learning and development—is grounded both in the research on child development and learning and in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness in early care and education.

But whether what actually happens in the classroom is, in practice, developmentally appropriate is the result of many decisions at all levels—by policy makers, administrators, educators, and families about the care and education of young children. Effective early childhood professionals draw on all the principles of child development and learning outlined; their knowledge of the individual children, families, and the community with whom they are working; and their knowledge of a wide repertoire of effective practices, and they apply the information in their practice.

The following guidelines address decisions that early childhood professionals make in five key (and interrelated) areas of practice: (1) creating a caring, equitable community of learners; (2) establishing respectful, reciprocal partnerships with families and communities; (3) observing, documenting, and assessing children’s development and learning; (4) teaching to enhance each child’s development and learning; (5) planning and implementing an engaging curriculum to achieve meaningful goals. These areas are generally consistent with previous editions of this statement, but they have been reordered to reflect consistency with the Early Childhood Educator Professional Standards and Competencies. It is also for this reason that a sixth area has been added regarding professionalism.

1. Creating a caring, equitable community of learners

Because early childhood settings are often among children’s first communities outside the home, the character of these communities is very influential in development. How children expect to be treated and how they treat others is significantly shaped in the early childhood setting. In developmentally appropriate practice, educators create and foster a “community of learners” that supports each and every child as they develop and learn. The role of the community is to provide a physical, emotional, and cognitive environment conducive to that development and learning. The foundation for the community is consistent, positive, caring relationships between the adults and children, among children, among educators, and between educators and families. Each member of the learning community is valued for the assets 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 ensure 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 assets they bring.** By observing and participating in the community, children learn about themselves and their world and also 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 consistent with their family’s usage;*

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2. *Educators acknowledge and accept the family composition that families define; and*
 3. *Educators demonstrate ongoing interest in each child's unique knowledge, skills, and cultural experiences and recognize these as assets for learning.*
- B. Relationships are an important context through which children develop and learn.** Children construct their understandings about the world around them through interactions with other members of the community (both adults and peers). Opportunities to play together, collaborate on investigations and projects, and talk with peers and adults enhance children's development and learning. Interacting in small groups provides a context for children to extend their thinking, build on one another's ideas, and cooperate to solve problems. (Also see guideline 2, "Establishing Respectful, Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Communities.")
- 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.* Recognizing that such abilities and behaviors reflect children's experiences, they seek to understand the reasons for the behaviors. They do so without lowering their expectations, especially for children of color. 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 and supportive relationships for all children, considering the range of self-regulation among the children. They do not blame children for their behavior but call on additional resources for support as needed. In K-3 classrooms, educators recognize that the more closely they manage and direct children's behavior, the fewer opportunities children have to practice self-regulation.
 2. *Educators are responsible at all times for all children under their supervision to ensure respectful behaviors.* They monitor, anticipate, prevent, and redirect behaviors not conducive to learning or disrespectful of any member of the community. They actively teach and model prosocial behaviors.
 3. *Educators set clear and reasonable limits on children's behavior and apply those limits 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.
 4. *Educators listen to and acknowledge children's feelings and frustrations.* They 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 that unfairly target children or adults in the classroom or home, undermine an individual's self-worth, or perpetuate negative stereotypes.
- D. Educators design and maintain the physical environment to protect the health and safety of the learning community members, specifically in support of young children's physiological needs for**

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activity, sensory stimulation, fresh air, rest, and nourishment. The daily schedule provides frequent opportunities for active, physical movement regardless of the length of program day or age of child. Children are provided opportunities for rest as needed. Outdoor experiences, including opportunities to interact with the natural world, are regularly provided for children of all ages. Consistent with the recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control, SHAPE, and the Academy for Pediatrics (citations), NAEYC recommends that periods of recess be scheduled daily for children in kindergarten and primary grades.

- E. **Educators ensure each and every member of the community feels psychologically safe.** The overall social and emotional climate is welcoming and positive.
1. *Interactions among community members (administrators, educators, families, children), as well as the experiences provided by educators, leave participants feeling secure, relaxed, and comfortable rather than disengaged, frightened, worried, or unduly stressed.*
 2. *Educators build on individual children's funds of knowledge, interests, and experiences to foster each child's enjoyment of and engagement in learning.*
 3. *Educators ensure that the environment is organized and the schedule follows an orderly routine that provides a stable structure within which development and learning can take place. While the environment's elements are dynamic and changing, overall it still is predictable and comprehensible from a child's point of view.*
 4. *Each and every child hears and sees their home language, culture, and daily lives reflected in the daily interactions and activities of the classroom. Children's various social identities are affirmed, and stereotypical thinking is countered.*
 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.*

2. Establishing respectful and reciprocal partnerships with families and communities

Developmentally appropriate practices require 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 should be respected as the primary experts about their children.

Practice is not developmentally appropriate if the program limits "parent involvement" to scheduled events (valuable though these may be), or if the program/family relationship has a strong "parent education" orientation. Parents, or any other family members fulfilling this role, do not feel like partners in the relationship when staff members see themselves as having all the knowledge and insight about children and view parents as lacking such knowledge. Such attitudes fail to take advantage of families' unique expertise and knowledge of their individual children and thus limit the ability to provide developmentally appropriate practice.

The following describe the kind 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.

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- A. **Educators take responsibility for establishing respectful, reciprocal relationships with families.** They strive to ensure mutual respect, cooperation, shared responsibility, and negotiation of conflicts toward achievement of shared goals. (Also see guideline 1, “Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners.”)
- B. **Educators work in collaborative partnerships with families, establishing and maintaining regular, frequent two-way communication with them.** When families who do not speak English, educators strive to use the language of the home by enlisting the help of community resources who can provide bilingual interpreters or volunteers identified by the family.
- C. **Family members are welcome in the setting, and there are multiple opportunities for family participation.** Families participate in program decisions about their children’s care and education.
- D. **Educators acknowledge a family’s choices and goals for the child and respond with sensitivity and respect to those preferences and concerns.** In the event of disagreements, educators do not abdicate their responsibility to implement developmentally appropriate practices but work with the family to find mutually acceptable 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 communication and in planned conferences.** Educators support families in ways that maximally promote family decision-making capabilities and competence.
- 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.
- G. **Educators take care to learn about the community in which they work, and they utilize 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 is essential for educators and programs to plan, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of the classroom experiences they provide. Assessment includes both formal and informal measures as a tool 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 cannot be intentional about helping children to progress unless they know where each child is with respect to learning goals. Both formative assessment (measuring progress toward goals) and summative assessment (measuring achievement at the end of a defined period or experience) are important but must be conducted in ways that are effective and authentically assess children’s learning.

Effective assessment of young children is challenging. The complexity of children’s development—including the likelihood of children fully demonstrating their skills in different contexts and the uneven nature of development—makes it difficult to accurately and completely assess. For example, authentic assessment

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takes into consideration such factors as a child's facility in each language or dialect 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 appropriate standards of reliability and validity based on characteristics of the child being assessed. When these standards are not met, these limitations should be carefully considered in any use of the results. Using assessments to label, track, or otherwise harm young children is not developmentally appropriate practice.

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

- A. **Observing, documenting and assessing young children's progress and achievements is ongoing, strategic, and purposeful.** Observations, documentations, and the results of other formal and informal assessments are used to inform the planning and implementing of experiences, to communicate with the child's family, and to evaluate and improve educators' and the program's effectiveness.
- B. **Assessment focuses on children's progress toward goals that are developmentally and educationally significant.** Such goals should reflect knowledge of state early learning standards as well as the goals of families.
- C. **There is a system in place to collect, make sense of, and use observations, documentation, and assessment information to guide what goes on in the classroom.** 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.
- D. **The methods of assessment are appropriate to the developmental status and experiences of young children. They recognize individual variation in learners and allow children to demonstrate their competence in different ways.** Methods appropriate to the classroom assessment of young children, therefore, include results of educators' observations of children, clinical interviews, collections of children's work samples, and children's performance on authentic activities.
- 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 other situations that are providing scaffolding.
- F. **In addition to this assessment by educators, input from families as well as children's own evaluations of their work are part of the program's overall assessment strategy.**
- G. **Assessments are used only for the purpose for which they have been demonstrated to produce reliable, valid information.**
- H. **Decisions that have a major impact on children, such as enrollment or placement, are never made based on results from a single developmental assessment or screening instrument/device.** Such decisions are based on multiple sources of relevant information, including that obtained from observations of and interactions with children by educators and family members (and specialists as needed).

- I. **When a screening or other assessment identifies children who may have a disability or individualized learning or developmental needs, there is appropriate follow-up, evaluation, and, if indicated, referral.** Diagnosis or labeling is never the result of a brief screening or one-time assessment. Families are involved as essential sources of information.

4. Teaching to enhance development and learning

From birth, a child's relationships and interactions with adults are critical determinants of development and learning. At the same time, children are active constructors of their own understanding of the world around them; as such, all children benefit from initiating and regulating their own learning activities (the ability to exercise agency) and from interacting with peers. Too often, children who are deemed "not ready" are denied agency and instead they receive more narrowly focused, adult-directed instruction (citations) when they would benefit from richer experiences with opportunity to exercise agency.

Developmentally appropriate teaching practices blend opportunities for children to exercise choice and agency within the context of a planned environment constructed to support specific learning experiences and goals. Even free play situations that maximize opportunities for child choice are provided with intentionality and purpose. Adult guidance is an important part of developmentally appropriate practice; it is not the same as "adult-directed" (citations). Given the wide range of individual variation of experiences, interests, skills and abilities among any group of young children, full-group learning activities in which all of the children are expected to listen to and follow the teacher's directions or complete a prescribed activity in the same way at the same time should be limited.

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 specific 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. Across all activities—free play, guided play, direct instruction either individually or in small or large groups, and routines—the teacher is responsible for ensuring that children's overall experiences are stimulating; engaging; and developmentally, linguistically, and culturally responsive across all domains of development and learning. Promoting opportunities for agency for each child is essential to fulfilling this responsibility.

The following describe teaching practices that are developmentally appropriate for young children from birth through the primary grades.

- A. **Educators are responsible for fostering the caring learning community through their teaching.** They recognize that through their actions, they are influencing children's lifelong dispositions, confidence, and approaches to learning.
- B. **Educators make it a priority to know each child well, and also the people most significant in the child's life.**
 1. *Educators establish positive, personal relationships with each child and family to better understand that child's individual needs, interests, and abilities and that family's goals, values, expectations, and childrearing practices. (Also see guideline 2, "Establishing Reciprocal Partnerships with Families and Communities.")* Educators talk with each child and family (with a community translator, if necessary,

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for mutual understanding) and use what they learn to individualize their actions and planning to match and build upon each child's assets.

2. *Educators continually gather information about children in a variety of ways.* They regularly monitor each child's learning and development to make plans to help children progress. (Also see guideline 3, "Assessing Children's Development and Learning.")
3. *Educators are alert to signs of undue stress and traumatic events in each child's life.* They employ healing-centered strategies to reduce stress and support the development of resilience.

C. **Educators make the experiences in their classrooms meaningful, accessible, and responsive to each and every child.** They design learning activities that reflect the lives and cultures of each child and that follow Universal Design for Learning principles (citation) by providing multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representation and multiple means of action and expression. Educators design experiences that celebrate the diversity in the experiences and social identities of each group of children and build upon the combined funds of knowledge to foster children's learning and understanding.

1. *Educators incorporate a wide variety of experiences, materials and 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 bring each child's home culture(s) and language(s) into the shared culture of the learning community.* They model their 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. Educators continually strive to support and sustain the child's connection with their family, languages and culture.
3. *Educators include all children in all the classroom 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 and those who exhibit unusual interests and skills.* Educators use all the strategies identified here, consult with appropriate specialists and the child's family, and see that each child gets the adaptations and specialized services needed for full inclusion as a member of the community.

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 that 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, "Planning Curriculum to Achieve Important Goals.")

E. **Educators effectively implement a comprehensive curriculum so that each child attains individualized goals across all domains (physical, social, emotional, cognitive) and across all subject areas (language literacy, including English acquisition, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, physical education, and health).**

- 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 intellectually 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.
 2. *Educators regularly present children with opportunities to make meaningful choices.* Within the broad framework of the overall curriculum, children are encouraged to shape specific learning activities and to identify projects that can be used to extend their learning. Children are regularly provided opportunities for child-choice activity periods, and 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 schedule 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 utilized. Adults offer questions to stimulate children’s thinking, introduce related vocabulary, and provide specific suggestions to scaffold children’s thinking.
 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 should affirm children’s use of home dialects and language as a strength while also supporting the development of 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.* In K-3 classrooms, such self-directed learning activities are provided in ways that engage children in meaningful learning that is relevant to the curriculum and appropriate learning standards.
 2. *To stimulate children’s thinking and extend their learning, educators pose problems, ask questions, and make comments and suggestions.*

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3. *To extend the range of children's interests and the scope of their thought, 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 level of skill and knowledge, educators increase the challenge as children gain competence and understanding.*
 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 genuinely successful and to be challenged.*
 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!").*
 8. *Educators focus on what children can do rather than what they can't or don't. For example, a child who responds to a question addressed in English by speaking in their home dialect is recognized for the ability to code switch rather than scolded for not using Standard Academic English. Similarly, invented spellings are analyzed for what they reveal of children's current understanding rather than penalized as being wrong.*
- H. **Educators know how and when to scaffold children's learning.** They 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 reducing the support as the child begins to master the skill and 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 under different circumstances.*
 2. *Scaffolding can take a variety of forms; for example, giving the child a hint, adding 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 (e.g., the child's learning buddy models) can be effective providers of scaffolding in addition to educators. Peer learning can be an especially effective mechanism for supporting emergent bilinguals (citation) that educators can use to address each child's need for support and assistance.*
- I. **Educators know how and when to use the various learning formats/contexts most strategically.**
1. *Educators understand that each major learning format or context (e.g., large group, small group, learning center, routine) has its own characteristics, functions, and value.*
 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, etc. Especially in the case of*

large group activities, they change formats when attention wanes. In K-3 classrooms, educators look for ways to reduce individual seatwork. They encourage collaborative learning through peer interaction and frequent opportunities for children to support each other's learning through pairs and small groups.

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 (citations). 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.

J. **Educators differentiate instructional approaches to match the child's interests 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, and cultural ways of knowing.

1. *Educators take care not to place children who enter the program with limited knowledge of books, school protocols, or English vocabulary under added pressure.* Such pressure on children can make school a frustrating and discouraging experience, rather than an opportunity to enjoy and succeed at learning.
2. *Regardless of the need to provide additional support, children are still provided agency to the greatest extent possible.* Educators build on the assets children bring, are highly intentional in use of time, and focus on key skills and abilities through highly engaging experiences that build on the assets of children and their families.
3. *Recognizing the self-regulatory, linguistic, cognitive, and social benefits that high-quality play affords, educators do not reduce play opportunities for children who need additional support to meet school readiness/grade level expectations.* Educators can scaffold and model aspects of rich, mature play to support learning for all children.

5. Planning 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 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 these children in particular, as well as about the sequences in which children acquire specific concepts, skills, and abilities, building on prior experiences.

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. Use of a formal, validated curriculum can be helpful, as long as educators have the flexibility to adapt units and activities to meet the interests and experiences of each group of specific

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children. Rigid, narrowly defined, skills-focused and highly scripted curricula often do not provide such flexibility and are not developmentally appropriate.

Educators use the curriculum and their knowledge of children's interests in planning 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 in their classrooms. Ideally, a well-planned curriculum is planned in a coordinated fashion across age and grade spans so that knowledge and skills are developed in a coherent, aligned manner, with each age or grade span building on what was learned previously. The focus includes broad concepts that can be tailored to meet the specific interests of a specific group of children and provide for revisiting concepts in greater depth over time. Well-designed early learning standards that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive can support this type of alignment and coherence (citations).

The following 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.
 2. *Educators are thoroughly familiar with state learning standards or other mandates.* Educators add to these any goals given inadequate weight in the standards.
 3. *Whatever the source of the goals, educators and administrators ensure that 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, including all those foundational for later learning and school success.**
 1. *Whether or not educators were participants in the decision about the curriculum, they familiarize themselves with it and consider its comprehensiveness in addressing all important goals.*
 2. *When the program uses published curriculum products, educators make adaptations to meet the learning needs of the children they teach.*
 3. *If educators develop the curriculum themselves, they make certain it targets the identified goals.* They use strong, up-to-date resources from experts to ensure that curriculum content is robust and comprehensive.
- C. Educators use the curriculum framework in their planning to ensure there is ample attention to important learning goals and to enhance the coherence of the classroom experience for children.**

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1. *Educators are familiar with the understandings and skills key for the children in their group in each domain (physical, social, emotional, and cognitive).* They know how learning and development in one domain impacts the other domains and crosses subject areas. They recognize that ensuring that the curriculum is culturally and linguistically sustaining for each child is essential to supporting these domains of development (citations).
 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.* Educators 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 to moving all children forward in all areas, adapting when necessary for individual children. When children have missed some of the learning opportunities that promote school success, educators must adapt the curriculum to help children advance more quickly. Such adaptations should maintain children's agency; children can be partners with educators in accelerating their learning, which reinforces high expectations and beliefs (on the children's part and on the educators' part) in children'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, 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, 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, their family, and the community 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, the experiences do not skim lightly over a great many content areas, but instead allow children to spend sustained time with a more select set. 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 grade levels, sharing information about children and working to increase the continuity and coherence across ages/grades.** They also work to protect the integrity and appropriateness of practices at each level. For example, they

push back against the push-down of curriculum when expectations to prepare children for a later test overwhelm the current curriculum.

- F. **Although it will vary across the age span, a planned and written curriculum is needed 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 while supporting and extending their cultural ways of knowing. Although social, emotional, and language development 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 but providing culturally and linguistically sustaining care and supporting all domains of development remains 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, developmentally appropriate practice serves as the hallmark of the early childhood educator profession. Fully achieving these guidelines in practice in order to effectively and fully advance early young child’s development and learning depends on the establishment of a strong profession in which all early childhood educators identify and conduct themselves as members of the profession and serve as informed advocates for young children and their families as well as the profession itself.

Early childhood educators meet the following guidelines in fulfilling their professional obligations:

- A. **Early childhood educators identify as members of the profession.** They are actively engaged in their profession, and serve as an informed advocate to advance equitable learning opportunities in early childhood education, and advocate for appropriate policy and organizational support for their work, including flexible, well-designed curricula and grade-level expectations that support developmentally appropriate practice and opportunities for in-service training that encourage reflective practice.
- B. **Early childhood educators follow all professional guidelines for appropriate education and preparation and achieve the required credentials needed for practice** [PLACEHOLDER FOR P2P implementation]. Recognizing that this is a work in progress, they are familiar with the Early Childhood Professional Standards and Competencies and seek professional development opportunities to maintain currency with these expectations for demonstrated knowledge, skills and dispositions.
- C. **Early childhood educators know, understand, and uphold ethical standards and other early childhood professional guidelines.** One of the defining characteristics of any profession is its code of ethics, and the early childhood education profession is no exception. Early childhood educators recognize their professional obligations to deeply understand the NAEYC Code of Ethical Conduct and to be guided by its ideals and principles in their decision making. They know about and utilize other professional guidelines such as the NAEYC position statement on advancing equity in early childhood education, professional standards by content-focused organizations or other specialized groups, as well as federal and state regulatory policies.

D. Early childhood educators engage in continuous, collaborative learning to inform their practice.

Early childhood educators recognize the complexity of their work and its dynamic and evolving knowledge base. Because they are frequently working with new groups of children and families, each of whom bring a unique mix of experiences, early childhood educators must continually be open to new ways of knowing and learning that will inform their practice. Early childhood educators often work in teams and/or benefit by collaborating with others. Collaborative learning communities with other early childhood educators as well as others in related disciplines and professions provide opportunities to exchange ideas and benefit from multiple perspectives and experiences. Collaborative skills are especially important, but not limited to, working in teams to support individual children and their families through IEP/IFSP teams.

E. Early childhood educators integrate research and critical perspectives on early childhood education and develop the habit of intentional, reflective practice.

Recognizing the limitations of the current professional knowledge base, educators recognize the need for continuous learning. They recognize that their judgments and practices reflect their experiences that may not be shared by others, and they welcome and take seriously the perspective of others.

F. Early childhood educators develop strong communication skills to effectively support young children's learning and development and to work with families and colleagues.

Educators need to be able to articulate the rationale behind their decision making, the essential components of developmentally appropriate practice, and the ways in which current conditions (e.g., inadequate compensation; a rigid narrowly defined and scripted curriculum; high-stakes testing; lack of recess) preclude the provision of developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive care and education.

Recommendations for schools, family child care homes, centers, and other program settings

- A. Work to support implementation of P2P, and until it is implemented, strive to meet its guidelines for professional qualifications and compensation.**
- B. Provide support to ensure that staff have the knowledge, skills and dispositions identified in the standards and competencies and are knowledgeable of and prepared to carry out these guidelines.**
- C. Ensure that administrators and supervisors understand these principles and use them in making decisions regarding program implementation.**
- D. Ensure that 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: staff ratios that meet the profession's guidelines. Across all levels of seniority, staff should reflect the diversity of the community and children served.
- E. Seek and maintain early learning program accreditation based on systems that are built to support developmentally appropriate practice.**
- F. Seek to ensure that schools and other programs are ready to provide equitable learning opportunities to all children to help them achieve their full potential, rather than expect them to meet specific readiness benchmarks or to expel them for misbehavior.**
- G. 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**

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combination of interests and needs of the children they are serving. Minimize “initiative” fatigue in which new curricular approaches are frequently adopted and then rejected (citation).

- H. **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 can be an important way of supporting the coherence and continuity of children’s learning experiences.
- I. **Actively engage family members and the broader community in all aspects of program planning and implementation, recognizing the systemic inequities that can make it difficult for members of traditionally marginalized groups to participate.**

Recommendations for Higher Education and Adult Development

- A. **Adopt and implement the Early Childhood Professional Standards and Competencies with their newly revised emphasis on equity and diversity as part of the overall implementation of P2P.** (P2P placeholder)
- 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 children’s opportunities for learning, and that they are prepared to fully support the optimal development and learning of each and every child.
- C. **Ensure that clinical practice experiences for prospective educators provide experiences working in settings that serve racially, linguistically, and culturally diverse groups of children across all socio-economic levels and age groups, including children with and without disabilities.**

Recommendations for Policymakers

- A. **Placeholder regarding P2P implementation.**
- B. **Ensure that all those working directly with children in early childhood settings, from birth through age 8, have access to the professional preparation needed to meet the standards and competencies as defined by the profession.**
- C. **Provide sufficient funding to provide equitable access to high-quality early childhood programs that meet these guidelines and follow other guidelines established by the profession, including small group sizes and providing 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).**
- D. **Recognize the limitations of accountability systems that narrowly focus on skill-based assessments.** Assessment policies should promote the use of authentic assessments that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically appropriate for the children being assessed and 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, inclusive of families, and 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.
- E. **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.

Recommendations for research

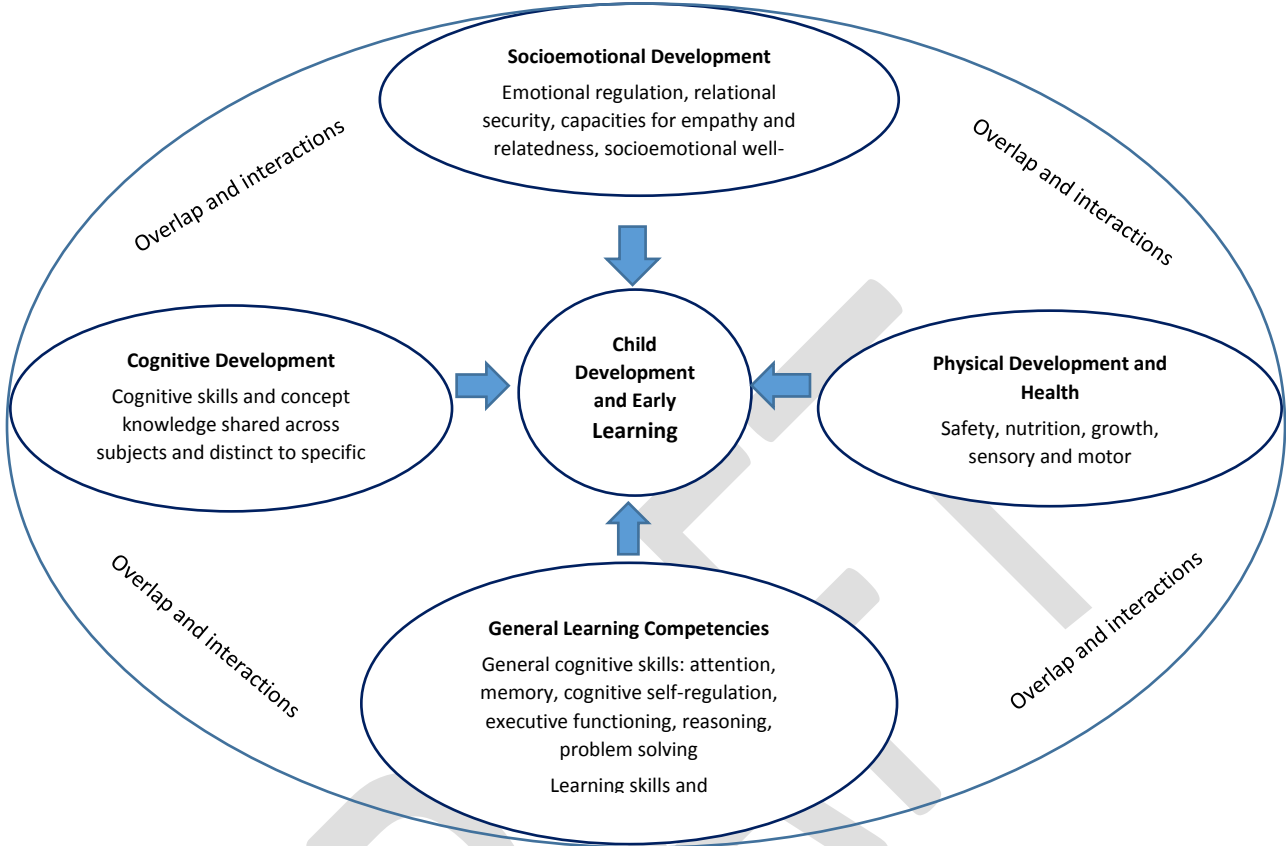
Following are important areas for further study:

- A. **Identify which instructional strategies and other characteristics of early childhood program provision work most effectively for which children under which circumstances.**
- B. **Identify strategies by which educators recognize their implicit biases and effectively address them to provide more equitable learning opportunities for all children.**
- C. **Develop assessment methodologies are needed that fully capture the complexity and diversity of children's development and learning in authentic, reliable and valid ways across multiple aspects of children's identity and reflect various cultural ways of learning.**
- D. **Continue to explore various dimensions of young children's development and learning, educator quality, and dimensions of effective teaching, and the ways in which these play out in different social and cultural contexts.** Because the knowledge base is constantly evolving, 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.

Conclusion

Since the release of *Minimum Standards for Nursery Education* shortly after the founding of its predecessor organization in 1929, NAEYC has connected practice, policy and research 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 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 remains the same. We continue to refine the ways in which we describe how developmentally appropriate practice can recognize and support the diversity and complexity of human development and promote more equitable learning opportunities for each and every young child. No doubt, over time, with more research and evidence of practice, further refinements will be made to this statement. But, the overarching goal of ensuring that all young children have equitable access to developmentally appropriate, high-quality early learning will remain unchanged.

Table 1. Domains of Child Development and Early Learning



Source: Figure 4-1. Report's organizational approach for the domains of child development and early learning. *Transforming the Workforce for Children Birth Through Age 8: A Unifying Framework*, 2015 p. 86

Appendix

Continuity and change in this revision

In many ways, this revision affirms the core concepts of DAP, 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 appropriate practice—the knowledge that educators must rely on as they intentionally make decisions each day to guide children’s learning and development to achieve goals that are both challenging and achievable for children (NAEYC 1996; 2009). These include: (1) knowledge of general principles of **child development and learning** that enable early childhood educators to make general predictions about what experiences are likely to best promote children’s learning and development; (2) knowledge about **each child as an individual** and the implications for how best to adapt and be responsive to individual variation; and (3) knowledge about the **social and cultural contexts in which each child lives**—the values, expectations, and linguistic conventions that shape children’s lives at home and in their communities 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.

Differences in social and cultural context have been identified as deficits and gaps rather than assets or strengths to be built upon (citation). Additionally, the implications of the social-cultural context of the educator herself 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 as well as to the program setting. It is essential to recognize that educators and administrators bring their own social and cultural context to bear in their decision making, and they must be aware of the implications of their context and its 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 and linguistic diversity of the young children population, and the increasing number of children whose families are immigrants (citation). They are also consistent with the NAEYC position statement on advancing equity in early childhood education, and they are reflected in the revised principles of child development and learning and guidelines for practice that comprise this position statement.