

Preface

Young children are born eager to learn about their world. The experiences of early childhood, including those that happen in centers, classrooms, and family child care programs, have a profound impact on us as individuals and as a society. Responsive relationships and environments nurture young children's development and learning and are key factors in supporting young children to thrive. Early childhood educators, teacher educators, and those who fund and administer educational experiences and environments have significant roles to play. How educators attend to all children's educational and developmental needs and social and emotional well-being is what developmentally appropriate practice is about.

Early childhood educators are drawn to the early childhood profession for a range of reasons: enjoyment of the unique, spontaneous, and joyful ways young children express themselves and explore the world; a desire to be part of children's early learning experiences; and an appreciation of the foundational nature of early childhood education. They understand how their role as educator can have an impact beyond the early childhood setting as they develop strong relationships with children, supporting children's learning in ways that are joyful and engaging and nurturing that spark to learn and explore well into the future.

“Developmentally appropriate practice encompasses the knowledge and considerations educators need to apply to create, participate in, and sustain effective and joyful learning environments.”

To effectively teach each and every child takes a great deal of knowledge and skill in multiple areas to further children's growth across the social, emotional, physical, cognitive, and linguistic domains of development. Early childhood educators must be able to support development of social skills and relationships; foster specific content knowledge in math, literacy, science, and social studies; facilitate and extend hands-on playful learning experiences;

use observation and assessment to inform teaching and further children's learning; and form and sustain partnerships with families. Developmentally appropriate practice encompasses the knowledge and considerations educators need to apply to create, participate in, and sustain effective and joyful learning environments. In short, it describes the complex and rewarding work of effective early childhood educators.

What Developmentally Appropriate Practice Means to the Early Childhood Field

Since NAEYC first published its position statements, books, and other resources on what it means to plan and implement intentional, high-quality learning experiences that promote optimal learning for young children, developmentally appropriate practice has become the North Star guiding the early childhood profession. But developmentally appropriate practice is not a static set of research findings or a definitive list of effective practices. It continues to evolve based on new research and understandings along with feedback and critique from the field. As described in this book and in the 2020 position statement, discerning whether or not something is developmentally appropriate is possible only with an understanding of child development; a deep knowledge of particular children; thoughtful consideration of specific learning goals; and a determination of what is culturally, linguistically, and ability appropriate for each child. No educational practice or learning experience is developmentally appropriate in and of itself in all settings and with all children. Educators make adjustments to planned activities, selected materials, the environment, and their interactions with children to best meet the individual needs and goals of each child based on the specific circumstances and contexts. To guide these continual adjustments, even the most seasoned educators can ask themselves: Is there new research I should know about? Are there areas of teaching to strengthen? Are there areas to refocus and reconsider?

A Brief History of NAEYC's Position Statement and Book on Developmentally Appropriate Practice

To understand where developmentally appropriate practice is now, it is important to see where it began at NAEYC. This historical context illustrates how the early childhood profession has grown and transformed, how it continues to develop, and what further work needs to be done to enable every educator to maximize the opportunities for every child to achieve their full potential.

NAEYC's creation of a position statement on developmentally appropriate practice was first conceived of as a guide to effective early education when NAEYC launched its national program accreditation system with specific guidance for teachers. The position statement was intended to offer a clear interpretation of effective early childhood practices that mapped to NAEYC's early learning program standards and to provide a better alternative to a trend in which methods of learning that are more appropriate for older children were being pushed down into kindergarten and preschool. NAEYC adopted its first position statements defining developmentally appropriate practice in 1986. The concept of *developmentally appropriate* was not new, having been used by developmental psychologists for years in reference to age-related and individual human variation.

Generally speaking, NAEYC has revisited its position statement and book on developmentally appropriate practice each decade in response to new knowledge, changing contexts, and feedback from the field:

1986

Initial position statements adopted on developmentally appropriate practice in programs serving children from birth through age 8 and in programs for 4- and 5-year-old children.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice. First book. Included a position statement on developmentally appropriate practice for children from birth through age 8 and sections on children from birth through age 3 and on 4- and 5-year-old children.

1987

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8, expanded edition. Added content on developmentally appropriate practices for 3-year-olds and children in the primary grades.

1996

Position statement on developmentally appropriate practice updated.

1997

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs, revised edition. Significant changes in this edition included viewing the educator as decision maker, recognizing that goals for children need to be both challenging and achievable, and expanding the basic definition of developmentally appropriate practice to include social and cultural contexts.

2009

Position statement updated.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8, third edition. Significant changes in this edition included new knowledge to guide practice and the rapidly changing context in which early childhood programs operate, including the growing role of public schools and the increasing focus on narrowing the disparities in achievement between various groups of learners.

2020

Position statement updated.

2022

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8, fourth edition.

The most recent revision of the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice, like the previous revisions, was guided by the NAEYC governing board and is based both on the current research base and on feedback and critique from the field. In addition, new understandings from the field of cognitive science have informed the position statement. Updates to the 2020 position statement, described in Appendix A of the statement, are reflected throughout this book as well. Updates were implemented to

- › Maintain a timely, cyclical revision of both position statement and book
- › Acknowledge limitations of the research base
- › Shift the view of differences in context from deficits to assets to build on
- › Address and disrupt implicit bias
- › Move away from the notion of “best practice” to emphasize a dynamic and creative set of practices that embrace and build on the varied assets children bring
- › Revise the core considerations to acknowledge the social and cultural contexts not only of children but also of educators and the educational setting
- › Update principles of child development and learning to reflect new research and incorporate social and cultural contexts of development
- › Reorder the guidelines for practice and include a new guideline on professionalism to be more consistent with NAEYC’s professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators

The Fourth Edition: What’s the Same, What’s Different

This edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* builds on previous editions as well as on the 2020 position statement. Like previous editions of the book, the fourth edition seeks to answer several questions: What is developmentally appropriate practice? What does it look like in a range of settings and at different ages? How can the ideas in the position statement be brought to life for education students, practitioners, and faculty?

In many ways, this revision of the book affirms the core concepts of developmentally appropriate practice. For example, NAEYC continues to underscore three core considerations—the knowledge that educators rely on as they intentionally make decisions each day to guide children’s development and learning toward challenging yet achievable goals. These include

1. Knowledge of principles of child development and learning that enable early childhood educators to make general predictions about what experiences are likely to be most enriching for children
2. Knowledge about each child as an individual and the implications for how best to effectively adapt and be responsive to individual variation
3. Knowledge about the social and cultural contexts in which each child lives—including family and community values, expectations, and linguistic conventions—that educators must strive to understand in order to ensure that learning experiences in the program or school are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for each child and family (NAEYC 2020a, 34)

A Diverse Group of Authors and Editors

Past editions of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* were written and edited primarily by NAEYC staff, and NAEYC owes great appreciation to the editors of those editions, Sue Bredekamp and Carol Copple. The fourth edition brings together NAEYC staff with many early childhood professionals representing different areas of expertise and experiences who served as chapter authors, contributing editors, volume editors, writers, and reviewers.

Bringing together so many people with a diverse range of expertise, contexts, and backgrounds offered many rewards as well as pushed those of us involved in the development of the book to expand our understandings. As we sought to bring multiple perspectives to this book, we needed to understand the different lens that each individual brought to the project and then attempt to weave together each new thread of experience, context, and knowledge into one strong, vibrant fabric, all within the context of developmentally appropriate practice.

At the same time, both the revised position statement and this book mark a profound departure requiring significant changes in current professional understanding and practice. For experienced educators, much in this new edition will be familiar. But while developmentally appropriate practice has always acknowledged the importance of cultural variation of children and families, a broader view now emphasizes the multiple social, cultural, and historical contexts of children and families as well as those of educators and society:

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

- › The principles of child development and learning acknowledge the critical role of social and cultural contexts and the fact that there is greater variation among the “universals” of development than previously recognized.
- › Understanding of the social and cultural contexts applies not only to children but also to educators and to the program setting. It is essential to recognize that educators and administrators bring their own social and cultural contexts to bear in their decision making, and they must be aware of the implications of their contexts and associated biases—both implicit and explicit—to avoid taking actions that harm rather than support each child's development and learning. (NAEYC 2020b, 34)

The changes are especially important given the growing racial, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity of the domestic and global populations. They are consistent with the 2019 position statement on advancing equity and are reflected in the revised principles of child development and learning and the guidelines for practice in the 2020 position statement on developmentally appropriate practice.

The first three chapters of the fourth edition define what developmentally appropriate practice is and how the core considerations and the principles of child development and learning have evolved.

Chapter 1, “Intentional Teaching: Complex Decision Making and the Core Considerations,” examines a reframing of developmentally appropriate practice in light of the significant expansion of the core consideration of context. This chapter also emphasizes the importance of teacher decision making, providing a range of examples of how educators think through the three core considerations—commonality, individuality, and context—as they make decisions throughout their teaching.

Chapter 2, “The Principles in Practice: Understanding Child Development and Learning in Context,” describes nine principles of child development and learning that reflect the research base and are enriched through the lens of context. Promoting early learning through relationships—with children, families, and colleagues—is now embedded in many of these principles but in particular principles 1 and 2, and the nature of supportive relationships as intrinsically connected to children's development and learning are emphasized.

Chapter 3, “Context Matters: Reframing Teaching in Early Childhood Education,” offers a way to think about and understand the implications of context in an increasingly diverse society. The chapter highlights the time of important cultural reflection that educators are in. This cultural reflection can be challenging; however, it is absolutely critical to fully support each child's optimal development and learning.

Chapters 4 and 5 expand on teaching content and supporting playful learning in early childhood education and offer ways effective educators embed play and content in their teaching. Chapters 6 through 11 each dive into one of the six guidelines for implementing developmentally appropriate practice.

Reframing “Best” Practice

One of the key decisions made during the revision of the position statement was to purposefully not use the term *best practice*. Effective practices

informed by research along with professional judgment are referred to as guidelines for early childhood educators' professional practice and are directly aligned to NAEYC's professional standards and competencies for early childhood educators (2020b). This reframing does not mean there is not clarity around appropriate practices; clear guidance for determining the most appropriate practice is reflected in the principles, the guidelines, and the core considerations outlined in the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice. Instead, this decision reflects the concern that, especially when applied to specific practices, "best" has often been used in the United States to reflect the dominant culture's assumptions. Educators who rely on the notion of a single "best" practice often make assumptions based on their own experiences, which may not have involved extensive experiences with a variety of populations. These assumptions can be biased if educators do not fully consider the specific abilities, interests, experiences, and motivations of a particular child or their family's culture, preferences, values, and childrearing practices when determining the most appropriate practice for that child. As discussed throughout this book, developmentally practices must be determined with an understanding of specific contexts in mind.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice and NAEYC's Foundational Documents

This book builds on five foundational documents that NAEYC has developed in collaboration with the early childhood profession:

- › "Developmentally Appropriate Practice"
- › "Advancing Equity in Early Childhood Education"
- › "Code of Ethical Conduct and Statement of Commitment"
- › "Professional Standards and Competencies for Early Childhood Educators"
- › "NAEYC Early Learning Program Accreditation Standards and Assessment Items"

These core documents work together as a whole to define and support the early childhood profession. They are grounded in NAEYC's core values that emphasize diversity and inclusion and that respect the dignity and worth of each individual (NAEYC, n.d.). The documents are built on a growing body of research and professional knowledge that underscore the complex and critical ways in which early childhood educators promote early learning through their relationships—with children, families, and colleagues—that are embedded in a broader societal context of inequities in which implicit and explicit bias are pervasive.

The influence of two of these statements in particular can be seen throughout this edition of *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*:

- › Position statement on advancing equity: The influences of this statement, published in 2019, can be seen in the authorship of the content and in the many examples included in the chapters. To move toward the goal of making developmentally appropriate practice a reality for all children, the authors considered context and equity from multiple perspectives as embedded within all aspects of educational practice.
- › Position statement on professional standards and competencies: The guidelines for decision making in six key areas of practice, discussed in detail in Part 2 of this book, correspond to the standards set forth in this statement. Throughout, the book brings to life the core knowledge, skills, and dispositions for effective early childhood educators that are identified in the standards and competencies.

In addition, because effective early childhood educators need well-developed and funded early childhood education systems as well as structures, education, and career pathways to make developmentally appropriate practice a reality for all children, the revised position statement and book align with the *Unifying Framework for the Early Childhood Education Profession* (AFSCME et al. 2020). This document defines a strong, equitable, diverse, effective, well-prepared, and well-compensated early childhood profession.

To acquire the knowledge and skills outlined in the professional standards and competencies and to implement the principles and guidelines described

in the developmentally appropriate practice position statement and book, educators must go further in their learning and training and continually update their knowledge. When a position statement is updated, it may bring unexpected changes, but these present an opportunity for educators to consider the new emphases as part of their ongoing self-reflection and professional growth.

2020 Context and Influences on this Book

The conception and planning of this book spanned several years, including the period of writing the position statements on developmentally appropriate practice, professional standards and competencies, and advancing equity. Beginning in early 2020, as authors began writing the initial drafts of their chapters and contributions, three significant events took place:

1. The COVID-19 pandemic was devastating the early childhood profession. Many chapter authors included material about the pandemic in their contributions—what it highlighted as related to equity, the stresses on specific populations, and the stresses on early childhood educators. While acknowledging the extreme circumstances for educators and families brought on by the pandemic, we chose to not refer to this event in detail throughout the book. Instead, we sought to value and share these contributions in ways that accommodate the long life cycle of a book and emerging events that add particular contexts to the education of young children.
2. The murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and the subsequent protests and activities to support the Black Lives Matter movement raised a broader awareness of the significant structural inequities impacting Black Americans, and they also significantly influenced authors as they were writing for this book.
3. As the editors were finalizing the manuscript, we were deeply impacted by a surge in anti-Asian violence in the United States, which strengthened our resolve to continue to discuss and work to reduce the inequities in society and in education through NAEYC's efforts. The shifting landscape

and conversations about equity underlie the connections of the position statement on developmentally appropriate practice to the position statement on advancing equity and the ongoing need for self-reflection and work to make high-quality early childhood education a reality for all children.

The editors and authors have worked hard to produce a volume that is both a product of its time and contexts and also one that will serve readers well until the next edition is developed.

Developmentally Appropriate Practice Is a Position Statement, a Book, and an Approach to Teaching

Developmentally appropriate practice has always been about effective teaching and joyful, engaged learning. As we work to understand what our profession means and what we should do as educators, it's important to take a step back and reflect on why and how we do what we do. Effective educators connect all they do to an approach that emphasizes the power of play and honors children's interests and deep engagement. We work to bring together education theory and new research into our practice. We reflect on what we do to best serve the children we teach. There are those who enter early childhood education after finding joy in working with young children and develop their knowledge through their careers. There are those who study early childhood education as students and gain additional knowledge as they observe and interact with children and educators in the classroom as part of their student teaching. There are those with advanced degrees who gain additional knowledge through practice and continuous learning, including becoming more nuanced in their understanding of equity and new research. Developmentally appropriate practice is for all of us as we strive to do the best we can to help all young children thrive.

—Susan Friedman
NAEYC Volume Editor