

Refocusing Leadership Goals and Aligning Program Change with Developmentally Appropriate Practice

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The term *developmentally appropriate practice* (DAP) may bring to mind teaching that is matched in content and approach to meet the needs of children at specific ages. The term was defined in the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) original [DAP Position Statement](#) in the mid-1980s in response to the growth of early childhood programs and the concern that expectations needed to be appropriate for children in preschool and kindergarten. The statement was expanded to address the teaching of children from birth through age eight with additional revisions in 1996 and 2009. The earlier versions offered important principles and core considerations for practice, yet sometimes resulted in educators relying on the notion of a single best practice, which could lead to teaching choices based on and limited by their own contexts and experiences. The concept of best practice also fostered the idea that all children would respond to teaching choices in the same manner and could be expected to achieve their best outcomes through the same ways of learning, understanding, and relating to classroom experiences.

The 2020 revision of the [NAEYC DAP Position Statement](#) affirms the need for educators to know and build on principles of child development. It also calls for expanded professional competencies that encompass a more complex and nuanced approach to teaching. Educators are guided to broaden their understanding of the critical role of context, including the contexts of the teacher and program and the social and cultural contexts in which children and families live. Educators and program leaders 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” (34).

The revised statement moves away from the idea of one best practice to embrace a set of creative and dynamic practices that incorporate the “specific abilities, interests, experiences, and motivations of a particular child and family’s culture, preferences, values, and child-rearing practices when determining the most appropriate practice for that child” (34). It includes the understanding of “family and community values, expectations, and linguistic conventions, in order to ensure that learning experiences in the program or school are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for each child and family” (34).

The timely release of the revised statement offers early childhood leaders an important opportunity to refocus and set new action steps towards creating [inclusive and equitable programs](#). It stipulates three core considerations that inform decision-making. The core considerations include:

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

- Individuality—the characteristics and experiences unique to each child, within the context of their family and community, that have implications for how best to support their development and learning.
- Context—everything discernible about the social and cultural contexts for each child, each educator, and the program as a whole” (6,7).

Nowhere are the core considerations more valuable than in the leadership practices of programs, where program administrators must navigate the complex dynamics present in organizational systems. Here, the context of the program itself – the policies, systems, and expectations – may be taken for granted by the program but actually raise barriers or create systems of inequity for others. Recognizing and removing barriers to equity is at the heart of developmentally appropriate practice. The nine principles and six guidelines of the DAP statement can serve as a catalyst for leadership oversight, reflective practice, and continuous quality improvement.

The November 30, 2021 release of the NAEYC book, [Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth Through Age 8, Fourth Edition](#), has come at an opportune moment to unify and strengthen the profession around goals of equity and inclusion and to assist early childhood leaders in guiding positive change. Like the DAP statement, the book was developed with multiple authors and a range of reviewers representing all sectors of the profession. The book attaches detailed action steps to the principles and goals of developmentally appropriate practice, moving the theoretical discussion into real praxis, where research, theory, and teaching are aligned. In each chapter, leaders will find a sequence of detailed guidance to help teachers develop a new level of understanding, compassion, and effectiveness.

The DAP book provides practical strategies, tips, and anchors for [pedagogical leadership](#) – which is an essential part of the [Whole Leadership Framework](#). Topics include the role of context in reframing early childhood education; decision-making; the power of playful learning; creating a caring, equitable community of learners; family engagement; child observation, documentation, and assessment; curriculum and teaching; and professionalism. Importantly, the chapters show how to strengthen relationships with families, shift to strengths-based teaching and communication, and foster reflective conversation and professional growth within the organization.

The DAP book also offers age-specific guidance, with charts that show practices essential for all children and those that are distinguished by age. Strategies for all ages include building on the languages and cultures of children and families’ lives and valuing and incorporating their [funds of knowledge](#). Teachers are guided to counter bias and create individualized teaching that promotes children’s self-agency and joyful learning. In contrast, the age-specific sections drill down to describe concrete skills and strategies that maximize learning and development for specific children.

While the core considerations and principles of developmentally appropriate practice reflect approaches to teaching children and working with families, early childhood program leaders will be instrumental in bringing needed changes to programs. Some key priorities for leadership include:

- mentoring teachers as professionals and advancing the [understanding of DAP](#) in the context of each program;
- embedding [anti-bias](#) values, messages, and practices throughout the program, including the program orientation, family handbook, and the physical spaces of the program;
- asking for feedback from families and staff about the handbook, program policies, and personal experiences related to diversity, equity, and inclusion, with the goal of removing barriers to participation;
- leading [anti-bias conversations](#) with staff, including placing intercultural learning as a priority, with opportunities to talk about [advancing equity](#) and creating positive change;
- letting families know that this is an anti-bias program, and pride and acceptance of diversity will be promoted in experiences and conversations with children;
- guiding reflective practice for staff through regularly scheduled [reflective supervision](#) and during group staff meetings;
- reserving time on meeting agendas to explore the content of the new DAP statement and book as a foundation for [continuous quality improvement](#), with the goal of strengthening the program's commitment to equity in staff practices, teaching, and family engagement;
- modeling the use of [strengths-based](#), affirming language to describe culture, race, ethnicities, and abilities, and using positive affirmation and encouragement to advance the work of staff, their contributions, and growth;
- identifying learning opportunities that promote understanding and awareness of DAP, including [NAEYC books](#), resources, and articles that focus on [anti-bias teaching](#), working with [multi-lingual and dual-language learners](#), and families;
- building on the [Whole Leadership Framework](#) and using the visual [graphic](#) with staff to illustrate how each area of the program can be aligned with developmentally appropriate practice to promote anti-bias teaching, diversity, equity, and inclusion; and
- becoming a strong advocate and working with others in the community to [make connections](#) and share resources among the program, families, and the community.

Early childhood leaders can use this time of unprecedented challenge and change in our profession to strengthen the competencies and commitment of program staff. The revised *NAEYC DAP Position Statement* and the book, *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children Birth Through Age Eight, Fourth Edition*, can be used to inform and revitalize the focus and effectiveness of programs. Using these resources, early childhood leaders can more effectively strengthen their approach to pedagogical leadership and staff development. The goal is to make sure every child experiences the highest quality teaching, with families integrated as essential partners in creating a thriving and equitable learning community.

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