



DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICES

FOR THE KENTUCKY EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOM



Kentucky Department of
EDUCATION

OSEEL

Office of Special Education & Early Learning

What are Developmentally Appropriate Practices?

The [National Association for the Education of Young Children](#) (NAEYC) defines Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) as “methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach to joyful, engaged learning.” Educators apply DAP by acknowledging each young student’s unique strengths and backgrounds in the early learning environment. Educators focus on nurturing each student’s physical, cognitive, social and emotional well-being, ensuring no harm comes to any aspect of their development. By creating supportive learning environments where all students and families feel included, educators help students reach their full potential across all areas of growth and learning.

DAPs emphasize the importance of recognizing each student as a valued member of the learning community. Therefore, to be truly developmentally appropriate, practices must also be tailored to each student’s individual abilities. The [Developmentally Appropriate Practice Position Statement](#) for Early Childhood programs serving students from birth through age 8 is available on the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) webpage.



What are the Principles that Guide DAP?

NAEYC’s guidelines and recommendations for developmentally appropriate practices are grounded in nine key principles in early childhood education. These principles are based on extensive research. For a more in-depth understanding, visit the list at [Principles of Child Development and Learning and Implications That Inform Practice](#).

1. Development and learning are dynamic processes that reflect the complex interplay between a child’s biological characteristics and the environment, each shaping the other as well as future patterns of growth.
2. Although general progressions of development and learning can be identified, variations due to family contexts, experiences and individual differences must also be considered.
3. Children learn in an integrated fashion that cuts across academic disciplines or subject areas. Because the foundations of subject area knowledge are established in early childhood, educators need subject-area knowledge, an understanding of the learning progressions within each subject area, and pedagogical knowledge about teaching each subject area’s content effectively.
4. All domains of child development—physical development, cognitive development, social and emotional development, and linguistic development (including bilingual or multilingual development), as well as approaches to learning—are important; each domain both supports and is supported by the others.
5. Children are active learners from birth, constantly taking in and organizing information to create meaning through their relationships, their interactions with their environment and their overall experiences.
6. 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.
7. Play promotes joyful learning that fosters self-regulation, language, and cognitive and social competencies, as well as content knowledge across disciplines. Play is essential for all children, birth through age 8.
8. 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 settings.
9. Used responsibly and intentionally, technology and interactive media can be valuable tools for supporting children’s development and learning.

What Is a Strengths-Based Approach?

A strengths-based approach extends beyond recognizing students' talents. It incorporates teaching strategies that are research-based to build upon a student's individual, social and family experiences and incorporates belonging, joy and belief in the capabilities of each student. According to Bredekamp (2022), educators should draw on resources that allow students from various backgrounds to express themselves during interactions with peers and adults. Educators also should reflect on personal belief systems to address assumptions to see how these might unintentionally influence relationships with families and communities. Some examples include:

- Working to develop a deep understanding of the families in each classroom;
- Involving every student's home culture, language and ethnicity in materials, books, music and classroom décor; and
- Use posters and books that portray persons with different abilities and cultures.



What Is a Play-Based Approach?

In early childhood, young students learn and understand the world by interacting with adults and peers. They also observe their surroundings by exploring and playing actively. Educators play a crucial role in creating a rich, play-based learning environment that fosters the development of knowledge (including vocabulary) and skills across all domains. They understand that a student's current abilities are largely shaped by their learning experiences.

Students with disabilities (or those at risk of developing them) have the capacity to learn. They need educators who avoid labeling or isolating them and are ready to work with them and their families to nurture their potential.

Play is a central teaching practice that supports young students' development and learning. It enhances their symbolic and imaginative thinking, peer relationships, language skills (both English and other languages), physical development and problem-solving abilities (Zosh, 2022). All young students need daily, sustained opportunities for play, both indoors and outdoors. Through play, students:

- Develop large-motor and fine-motor skills;
- Explore and understand their world;
- Interact with others;
- Express and regulate their emotions;
- Develop symbolic and problem-solving abilities; and
- Practice emerging skills (Bredekamp, 2022).

Various Forms of Play



1. SOLITARY

Student is playing alone and not interacting with others.



2. ONLOOKER

Student watches others and remains on the “sideline.”




3. PARALLEL

Student plays side-by-side but does not interact with others.




4. SOCIAL

Student shares toys and communicates with others; play does not have a common goal.




5. COOPERATIVE

Student plays with others toward a common goal or to create something.



6. DRAMATIC/FANTASY

Student uses their imagination to create and act out scenarios.




7. PHYSICAL

Student uses the body to run, jump, climb and play sports.



8. CONSTRUCTIVE

Student uses blocks or other materials to construct and build.



9. GAMES WITH RULES

Student joins activities with established rules and guidelines.

How Can Teachers Apply DAP In the Classroom?

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DAP	Suggestions for Implementing Strategies and Approaches
Caring Community of Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a physical environment that prioritizes the health and safety of every student;• Design a learning setting that supports the varied needs of young learners, including the need for play, free choice, sensory opportunities, movement, outside time and rest;• Facilitate the development of relationships between all community members, including those between adults and peers, students and peers and between adults and students;• Ensure access to instructional materials that promote play and stimulate complex conversations while honoring individual cultures and home languages; and• Provide instruction for the development of self-regulation, including calming techniques and strategies for problem solving.
Reciprocal Relationships with Families and Community Connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop and maintain effective, two-way communication with all families, recognizing that not all modes of communication are appropriate for all families;• Establish welcoming and inviting settings where families are encouraged to participate and are provided with multiple opportunities to engage regularly;• Actively seek family input, preferences and knowledge regarding their student during goal planning; and• Provide opportunities for the sharing of family traditions, home language and stories.
Observing, Documenting and Assessing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assess only what is developmentally appropriate;• Use assessments that are embedded into daily routines and play activities that are authentic;• Use assessments that are responsive to the accomplishments and individual needs of all students;• Ensure when a developmental screener indicates the possibility of a potential delay, follow-ups are taken, which may include the need for a referral and evaluation for special education; and• Involve families in the assessment process and provide them with tools for home use.



DAP	Suggestions for Implementing Strategies and Approaches
Teaching to Enhance Each Student's Development and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Offer meaningful experiences that are responsive to multiple perspectives and include a variety of materials, equipment and teaching strategies; • Ensure all activities and materials are age appropriate; • Ensure all activities are designed to meet the individualized needs of every student; • Design a daily schedule that supports each student's learning and development, and is responsive to their individual needs; and • Implement a curriculum that supports goals that are both age-appropriate and individualized in all domains (health and mental wellness, cognitive, language and approaches to learning) and across all subject areas (language and literacy, math, social studies, science, creative arts and technology).
Planning and Implementing an Engaging Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum should target goals across all domains (health and mental wellness, cognitive, language and approaches to learning) and all subject areas (language and literacy, math, social studies, science, creative arts and technology); • Ensure the curriculum provides the framework for all instructional planning; • Ensure the curriculum aligns with Kentucky Early Childhood Standards and developmental milestones. • Make sure instruction is personalized and differentiated to meet the individual needs of each student; • Ensure collaboration occurs between classroom teachers, service providers and subsequent grade teachers; and • Ensure that all students have access to high-quality learning resources.
Demonstrating Professionalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follow all ethical guidelines and professional standards; • Maintain clear, respectful and professional communication with colleagues, students and families; • Commit to continuous learning, attending approved conferences and trainings; • Be an informed advocate for families and the early childhood profession; and • Reflect on practices to enhance working with students.

What is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)?

Early childhood programs should intentionally design the environment and instruction to be responsive to all students' needs. Opportunities for demonstrating learning and growth in all areas should be provided. The principles of UDL are fundamental to this concept, emphasizing the need for flexibility and customization for all students, regardless of individual abilities or learning preferences.

When creating an early childhood environment, the principles of UDL are considered to ensure responsiveness to individual learners from diverse cultures, abilities, languages and life experiences, fostering development across all domains (Bredenkamp, 2022). Universal approaches, strategies and materials are embedded to support various learners as they interact and play. These early learning environments are intentionally designed to encompass physical, social and temporal components. These principles include presenting content in different ways, allowing students to show what they know in different ways and using multiple ways to engage and motivate the students.

For more information, please see the UDL video series on the [KDE Instructional Resources](#) webpage or the resources list on page seven.

Present content in different ways.

Allow students to show what they know in different ways.

Use multiple ways to engage and motivate the students.

How Does NAEYC Align with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and the Division of Early Childhood (DEC)?

The Early Childhood Personnel Center worked with the DEC, NAEYC and the CEC to develop and align the personnel standards for each organization. According to the [Early Childhood Personnel Center website](#), "These alignments were done to assist higher education faculty and professional development staff to align their curricula with knowledge and skills and standards for early childhood special educators who serve infants and young students and their families." More information on the purpose of this collaboration can be found in the [Final Official Initial Standards Alignment](#) document. The Advanced Standards Alignment for personnel link can be found in the resources on page seven.



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What is Engaged Learning and United We Learn?

[United We Learn](#) is Kentucky's vision for the future of public education in the Commonwealth. The vision is built around three main ideas: vibrant experiences for every student, encouraging innovation in the schools and collaboration within our communities. Within these main ideas lie many opportunities to engage everyone in our communities – educators, families, students, community members and business leaders – and provide all students with engaging learning opportunities.



Engaging and dynamic student experiences ignite curiosity, motivation and involvement, fostering a passion for lifelong learning. Central to this mission is the creation of vibrant learning experiences, which include personalized educational journeys that honor each family's unique story, ensuring every student feels recognized, supported and inspired to achieve success.

As defined by the [Kentucky United We Learn Council](#), vibrant learning experiences are those that matter to students. Their definition states, "In partnership with families and communities, students are agents of their own learning, engaged in relevant, authentic and joyful learning opportunities. Vibrant learning culminates in the application of knowledge and skills demonstrated through personalized products."

Kentucky's [Portrait of a Learner](#) (PoL), "identifies the skills students need to be prepared for an ever-changing world that is driven by technology, human interaction and innovation," and aligns with the three main ideas of United We Learn. The [six competencies of Kentucky's PoL](#) highlight that while academic content and success are important, it is equally crucial for all students to develop critical thinking and effective communication skills. Additionally, all students should be empowered learners, productive collaborators, engaged citizens and creative contributors. Please see the [Kentucky Portrait of a Learner Frequently Asked Questions](#) for more information.



KENTUCKY PORTRAIT OF A LEARNER

Resources:

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