
DAP: What Does it Mean to Use Developmentally Appropriate Practice?

NOVEMBER 15, 2010 *by* NOTJUSTCUTE | *filed under:* CHILD DEVELOPMENT & DAP, UNCATEGORIZED | [22 Comments](#)



It's occurred to me that I've used the term DAP a lot around here lately, and that it's a term that warrants a full discussion in itself. This is a term you can take an entire series of courses on, but here's my best attempt to get you the basics — quick and dirty! I'm hoping this will serve as a reference point for more discussions!

DAP, or Developmentally Appropriate Practice, encompasses a wider set of beliefs and practices, which are professed by many experts in the field of early education and child development to be “best practice” for teaching young children, from birth to 8. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), DAP encourages teachers to make choices about education based on sound knowledge of child development and learning processes while taking into account individual differences and needs, as well as social and cultural constructs. **Sounds like a reasonable expectation right?**

What this means, is that teachers need to be free to make decisions based on **what children need developmentally (generalized by age and stage), individually, and culturally** to make the most of their educational experiences. This implies highly trained teachers with an appropriate amount of autonomy. You can't very well create a one-size-fits-all approach, implement it across the board, and call it DAP because the entire philosophy implies an attention not only to general developmental levels, but those of individuals as well.

According to Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp, authors of *Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, teachers who practice DAP **meet learners where they are** (not necessarily where they should be) and take into consideration **all the developmental areas of the whole child** (physical, emotional, social, cognitive). They provide learning opportunities that are **challenging yet achievable**, working within the ZPD. And they

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Close and accept

“Developmentally appropriate practice refers to teaching decisions that vary with and adapt to the age, experience, interests, and abilities of individual children within a given age range.” (pg7)

DAP is a way of teaching that focuses on how children learn best. And it's something that policymakers would do well to become more aware of. **Ignoring DAP in an effort to “get ahead” is generally counterproductive because it ignores the way children are**

naturally wired to develop. It replaces in-born motivation and inquisitiveness with mandates no 5-year-old can understand or care about. Considering DAP while creating policy, curriculum, and individual learning environments yields the best results because it is based on what is known through research and observation and recognized widely in the field of early education as best teaching practices. It is built from what we know about how kids learn.



So how do kids learn best?

Again from Copple and Bredekamp's book, children need:

- **Relationships with responsive adults**
- **Active, hands-on involvement**
- **Meaningful experiences**
- **Opportunities to construct their understanding of the world** (a process supported by the three previous constructs)

So what would you see in a DAP learning environment?

Teaching would take place in a variety of formats. It's woven into every aspect of the environment from procedures and environment, to experiences, activities, and even moments of direct instruction. In Copple and Bredekamp's book, they outline four learning formats where teachers can implement a variety of teaching strategies. They are:

- **Large groups**

- **Small groups**
- **Play and engagement in learning centers**
- **Daily routines**

Each format provides a different opportunity for teaching, learning, and discovering together. Within the variety of teaching formats, strategies, and particular activities, **practitioners of DAP promote the health and development of the whole child, not just the aspects measured on the standardized tests**. Copple and Bredekamp, as well as NAEYC, promote attention to:

- **social-emotional development**
- **language development**
- **literacy development**
- **mathematics**
- **technology and scientific inquiry and knowledge**
- **understanding ourselves and our communities**
- **creative expression and appreciation for the arts**
- **physical development and physical skills**

These areas of development are **interrelated** and many are often supported with the same activity. For example, painting at the easel may promote physical development (motor skills), creative expression and appreciation for the arts, social-emotional development (if painting to express feelings), and language development (if discussing the painting with a thoughtful teacher). So as you can see, **the notion that a developmentally appropriate approach can be pitted against an “academic” approach is really nonsensical**. The method of DAP certainly yields academic understandings, but the method of instruction may take on a different (and I would say more *appropriate* and *effective*) form.

What it Boils Down To

In case I haven't bombarded you with enough bullet lists, here are the **basic principles of child development that guide the decisions of practitioners of DAP**, outlined by

NAEYC and paraphrased by me from their position statement (linked below). If all educators – teachers and parents alike – and all policymakers would agree to these precepts, I would be a very happy girl, and our children would reap all the benefits. These tenets are based on the *intentionality* that is central to DAP. **That teachers are intentional in their teaching, making decisions based on these researched and practiced beliefs is the central premise for DAP:**

1. **All domains** of child development (social, emotional, physical, cognitive) are important and interrelated.
2. Many aspects of child development follow a **consistent documented progression**, with later skills and proficiencies building upon the others already acquired.
3. **Rates of development vary** from child to child and even vary between domains of development within the individual child.
4. Development and learning takes place within the dynamic interaction of **both biological maturation and personal experience**.
5. **Early experiences** have profound effects, and there are **optimal periods** for certain types of learning and development.
6. **Development builds** towards greater complexity, self-regulation, and representational thinking capabilities.
7. Children learn best within **caring and positive relationships** with adults and peers.
8. Development and learning occur in and are influenced by **society and culture**.
9. Children are always seeking to understand the world around them. They learn in a **variety of ways** and therefore a variety of teaching methods and learning experiences should be offered to reach those different learning styles.
10. **Play** is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as social, language, and cognitive development.
11. Development and learning are advanced when children are **challenged** just above their competency and when they have many opportunities to practice new skills.
12. Children's **experiences** shape their motivation and approach to learning (persistence, initiative, flexibility) and these dispositions in turn influence their learning and

development.

(You can read more about each statement in the NAEYC's position statement linked below.)

What is your view and/or experience with developmentally appropriate practice? How does it shape the way you approach the education and development of the children you love and teach?

For More Information:



(Stairs Image Source)

I wrote a whole in-depth series of posts on this very topic! Start with this post: [On DAP and Why We Don't Push Kids Down the Stairs](#)

Also Read:

[NAEYC: DAP Frequently Asked Questions](#)

NAEYC: 2009 DAP Position Statement

Top photo by *Anissa Thompson*.

Center photo by *Horton Group*.



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 August 16, 2017
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Comments



PLAY. FIGHT. REPEAT. *says:*
 November 15, 2010 at 9:36 am

1

Wow, this is great! Thanks for boiling down so much information on DAP into one helpful post. My kids attended (and thrived in) a preschool which used the tenets of DAP, but whenever people ask me to explain what this program entails, I struggle to do so succinctly. Now I will send them to your post!

Suzita Cochran

Reply



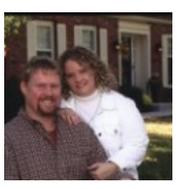
NOTJUSTCUTE *says:*

November 16, 2010 at 1:31 am

2

Glad to help, Suzita!

Reply



JEWELS *says:*

November 15, 2010 at 11:09 pm

3

Copple and Bredekamp are missing a few items in their list of How do kids learn best and what to see in a DAP learning environment: How about...

A WELL PREPARED ENVIRONMENT <http://www.montessori-ami.org/montessori/environment.htm>

OPPORTUNITIES FOR INDEPENDENT LEARNING and SELF CORRECTING

And what about paying attention to GEOGRAPHY along with literacy, math, science...and so on...

EDUCATED DIRECTRESS ie above college level!

one on one INDIVIDUALIZED LESSONS

You asked, “What is your view and/or experience with developmentally appropriate practice?” and “How does it shape the way you approach the education and development of the children you love and teach?”

My answer to that question is simply...keep researching... You have a lot to learn....I suggest the site:

<http://www.montessori-namta.org/introduction-to-montessori-education>

or

google Montessori philosophy/method and so on.

My eyes were opened to a whole new and happier world when I was introduced to the method of education that teaches children the joy and love of learning in a natural environment.

Reply



NOTJUSTCUTE *says:*

November 16, 2010 at 12:20 am

4

Hi Jewels, Thanks for sharing your knowledge of the Montessori method. The Montessori method is a fantastic example of DAP. At the same time, not all DAP falls under the Montessori method. The items you pointed out certainly fit in the schema of DAP – a well prepared environment, opportunities for learning and self-correcting, and individualized lessons fit within the concept of teaching with a variety of methods, strategies, and formats as well as recognizing each learner as an individual.

I certainly agree that an educated teacher/directress is of great importance, and I really think that may be why we see DAP disappearing in many situations: teachers must be qualified to be given the autonomy required to make the individualized adjustments necessary within DAP.

As for the geography question, that may fall under the “understanding

ourselves and our community” aspect, as that is the jumping off point for geography. But I can certainly see your point, where there may be room to expand on that subject.

Reply



BETH HUBER *says:*

November 20, 2013 at 6:36 am

5

I find this information very useful and thorough. I am an early childhood educator and my current position includes both empowering and learning FROM childcare providers. When providers are valued and taught to use community resources and strengthen their relationships with children AND families, then the quality of their caregiving improves drastically. I believe that your response to Jewels was very respectful and thorough. There is nothing in DAP that suggests that the Montessori method can not be utilized. DAP encourages planning for individual children. Environment is a huge factor in DAP. When I teach early childhood courses and work with childcare providers, I encourage them to find what works for them and the children in their care. We talk about Montessori, Vygotsky, Reggio Emilia, Piaget and Bronfenbrenner.....just to name a few. College education is not attainable for all. I have met many, many amazing childcare providers and preschoolers who do not have a degree and are still practicing DAP. I talk to the childcare providers about what is going on in the nation's schools right now. I do emphasize that the time the children have in their care is most possibly the only chance of DAP they will get. So it is crucial that they building the foundation for best practice now. Thank you so much for this well-organized information. I will be sharing it with the infant/toddler class I am currently teaching as well as the two social media sites that I manage.

Reply



RUTH *says:*

October 26, 2013 at 9:46 am

6

As a fairly new teacher, I struggle with implementing the above strategies and still teaching to the guideline set before me to get the students to “pass the test.” The district I work for does an amazing job at helping us to create an environment that promotes DAP but realistically, I feel, we are still aiming at getting them to pass the end of the year state regulated test. What are your thoughts on the state tests, and how do you think home schooling differs to create a DAP environment?

Thanks

Reply



KATHERINE COLLMER *says:*

October 28, 2013 at 6:25 am

7

Thank you for this information piece. I have pinned and will share, as I feel that there are so many instances where we push children past their developmental readiness points. In my practice, as an OT specializing in children’s handwriting, I find that often parents of toddlers are coming to me with concerns that their child is not writing yet. It takes quite a bit of convincing (and I’m not sure they are truly

convinced) that pushing them ahead is not a positive choice. I enjoy your posts and especially feel connected to this one. Thanks again, Katherine

Reply



MELISSA *says:*

April 7, 2014 at 7:57 pm

8

great analogy and article, except, how do we know what is developmentally appropriate at each age? ...i definitely never knew that the switch footing thing wasn't really able to be learned/mastered until 3+ (my 3yo is a pro at stairs –fast and stable– given that we are *always* on them living in NYC, but now that you mention this, he's still not switch footing!), so how would i know any other DAP things and when they should happen and be appropriate? is there a list? a source we can reference to look up things? i would love to really know so i can be sure to keep my boundaries and their limitations clear.

Reply



LAVINA *says:*

August 13, 2014 at 10:31 pm

9

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October 16, 2013 at 1:51 am

[...] Developmentally Appropriate Practice is always appropriate. [...]

What is Developmentally Appropriate Practice? | Not Just Cute
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October 29, 2013 at 11:17 pm

[...] (For more on what it means to use Developmentally Appropriate Practice, including links to NAEYCR... [...]

Why We Choose DAP at WOD! *says:*

November 26, 2013 at 9:08 am

[...] Developmentally Appropriate Practice is always appropriate. [...]

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December 12, 2013 at 9:30 am

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THEORY – DAP: Developmentally Appropriate Practice | SmartPrimaryEd *says:*

April 16, 2015 at 1:09 am

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February 7, 2018 at 4:31 am

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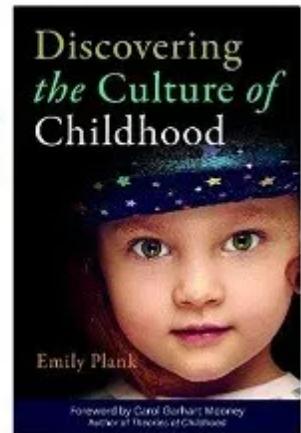
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