



Best Practices

Developmentally appropriate practice is carefully planned, intentional teaching based on what is known about the developmental stages and ages of the children we teach. The goal is to bring children to their full potential—cognitively, socially, emotionally, and physically.

Effective early childhood educators understand what is typical at each age and stage of a child's development while also being aware that each child is different. They get to know each child individually so that they can build on a child's prior knowledge, skills, developmental level, and interests, and address the full range of abilities each child brings to the learning environment.

To provide developmentally appropriate instruction, educators should understand how preschool-age children typically think and behave, recognize that each child has different strengths, and work towards developing each child's ability to self-regulate.

Understand How Children Think

Developmentally appropriate practices are defined as teaching and learning experiences grounded in what we know about how children learn at different ages and stages of development. Based on understanding the characteristics of a “typically-developing” child and recognizing that children vary within that norm, these practices require careful and deliberate planning. Educators should find every opportunity to reach out to children in specific ways for each child.

- **Young children tend to be concrete thinkers.** They cannot think in abstract ways. They need active, participatory learning that uses their senses. They need to touch, feel, and participate in experiences.
- **Young children are often egocentric thinkers.** They tend to see the world strictly from their own perspective. Educators can help children move beyond their own perspective to understand, appreciate, and respond to others' perspectives.
- **Young children generally have centered thinking.** They process one variable at a time. For example, they may see an object by its color, or by its shape, but usually not both at the same time. A good rule of thumb is “one step at a time.” Rather than introducing two variables in a pattern (color and shape), the educator asks children to consider color first. In a later step, children can focus on a second variable.
- **Young children tend to confuse appearances (the way things look) with reality (the way things are).** They might think their thumb is bigger than the moon, because the thumb can cover the moon.

Why is it important to provide developmentally appropriate learning?

- Children learn best when adults recognize their individual needs and interests.
- Children are encouraged to explore what excites their curiosity. Like adults, children participate actively in activities that are interesting to them and inviting. Unlocking that curiosity is key to learning.
- Young children learn best through a combination of explanation and experience.

What strategies can educators use to teach to children's concrete way of thinking?

- Encourage children to use their senses to feel, taste, see, and experience new things and concepts. Children learn best when they can *feel* a snakeskin to understand what the word *scaly* means, walk the distance to see the length of a dinosaur, or hold a turtle shell to measure its circumference.
- Provide hands-on experiences to help children explore the world directly. Then extend the experience. For example:
 - Display real-life objects for children to explore using all their senses. (*Hold the snakeskin. What does it feel like? What does it sound like when you move it? What does it smell like?*)
 - Introduce sensory vocabulary. For example, during a turtle shell exploration, introduce the words *rough, smooth, light, dark, heavy, full, and empty*. Then read and display picture books about turtles.
 - Encourage conversations and help inquisitive minds to test theories and hypotheses. (*How can we tell how long the turtle is? How can we measure how round it is on top? What words can you think of that describe the snakeskin?*)

How can educators respond to children's centered thinking—their tendency to pay attention to one task at a time?

- Give children simple directions, one step at a time. For example, rather than saying *Let's make a snowflake pattern using all of these colors*, break down instructions into smaller tasks.
 - *Let's make a pattern. White, blue, white, blue. What comes next?*
 - *Yes, white. Then what comes after that?*
 - *Now let's say the pattern. White, blue, white, blue, white.*

Recognize Children's Strengths

We know that there are typical physical, social, emotional, and cognitive benchmarks in a child's development—for example, the age at which a child is expected to walk or talk. We also know that when these benchmarks are reached can vary greatly from one child to another. Educators should also be aware that children have different kinds of skills or "intelligences." Some children have good social and emotional skills, others excel in math and science, and others in language and literacy, or art.

As Professor Villegas-Reimers says in the overview, "We should promote all kinds of intelligences in the classroom." To do this, educators should acknowledge children's strengths.

- **Recognize that all children are intelligent in different ways.** For one child, language may be his or her strength while for another child, it may be music, mathematics, science, drama, or something else.
- **Help children develop and become aware of their own strengths.** Create an atmosphere that is open to children's expanding development. For example, a space for children to create and act out dramatic play situations can help them become more aware of their abilities and experiment with and learn how to use their five senses to observe the world.
- **Identify and use children's strengths to address their weaknesses.** For instance, if a child is good at expressing himself or herself through sound and music, but does not easily grasp math concepts, try using musical rhythms to demonstrate those concepts (e.g., patterns).

Why is it important for educators to be familiar with developmental ages and stages?

- Knowing how children grow and change helps educators adapt their planning, pace, content, and teaching methods.
- Familiarity with typical development patterns can alert educators to signs that a child might be delayed or need extra help, or that a child is advanced and needs more and new challenges to keep him/her engaged.

How can educators teach to children's strengths and needs?

- Observe children regularly. Educators should be skilled "child-watchers."
- Listen closely as children play, respond in groups, react to stories and read alouds, and interact with peers.

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

- Notice where children choose to spend their time. Are they more comfortable in the reading corner? The block center? At the easel? These activities can help adults assess a child's strengths and interests.
- Use children's strengths to address their weaknesses. For example, if a child enjoys reading but struggles with science, share a book about science.
- Provide a multitude of choices. Young children are open to the world of learning. Giving them choices often introduces or reinforces interests that are just developing. (*Would you rather work with beads, paint at the easel, or read a book?*)
- Pair learners with different strengths. Children can learn from each other.

How can educators nurture children's strengths?

- Be explicit in recognizing and positively reinforcing a child's strengths. (*I like your pattern. You chose red, blue, red, blue. You did a great job!*)
- Acknowledge strengths and encourage others to reinforce them, too. (*Jaden is really good at puzzles. If you need help, ask him.*)
- Emphasize at least one strength for every child. Vary which strength is identified so as not to align a child with only that strength.
- Ask parents and other caregivers at home for their insights and observations. Discuss how the child likes to spend his or her time at home.
- Ask the child what she or he is good at doing. They often have surprising knowledge and self-awareness.
- Encourage children to do something they have never done or something they think they are not good at. Recognize the effort rather than the final product.

Develop Self-Regulated Learners

For a young child, self-regulation means learning to control one's emotions and behaviors well enough to focus on tasks, enjoy activities, solve problems, and get along with others. Self-regulation is the result of a well-developed *executive function*—all the cognitive processes that help a child think and behave in an organized way.

Children do not become self-regulated learners on their own. In order to develop good emotional and social skills, children need a nurturing, supportive, and positive environment with rules that are purposeful, easy to understand, and enforced. When children see themselves as an important part of the learning community, they feel more confident and are better able to control impulsive and disruptive behaviors. This, in turn, helps them develop their executive function, which later helps them in school and life.

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

- **Model problem-solving strategies.** Use role-play to help children understand that they have options for handling problems.
- **Understand and support children's emotions, fears, and frustrations** that stem from their struggles for success, especially as compared to their peers.
- **Use language to support children.** Ask questions and model language that encourage children to think about other people, not just themselves. (*Why do you think Paloma is sad? Or, Tell Peter why you're sad. Say, You stepped on my building.*)
- **Set up activities and centers to support children's self-control and self-regulation.** Limit opportunities for distraction, conflict, and frustration. Don't present challenging tasks at a time when children will have difficulty controlling their impulses (such as before lunch time or nap time).

How can educators provide developmentally appropriate learning that fosters self-regulation?

- Use role-play to help children act out situations, help one another, and negotiate solutions.
- Encourage children to think of others' feelings, not just their own (even though their natural tendencies toward egocentric thinking may make it difficult for them to see things from other people's perspectives).
- Understand that children who differ in age and development have specific needs.
- Set up activities and centers so as to limit distraction, social conflict, and feelings of frustration. Consider schedule and children's disposition when presenting challenging tasks (e.g., children might have difficulty tackling new situations or controlling impulses before lunch time or nap time).

How can educators help children learn negotiating skills?

- Supply the words children need to express their feelings and show how using words results in a more satisfying resolution.
- Model language to help children process what is happening by thinking aloud.
- Role-play difficult situations and their solutions (e.g., sharing, taking turns, apologizing) to help children learn how to deal with conflicts.
- Ask questions that encourage children to consider persons, objects, or events not immediately present and to think about other people, not just themselves.

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

What are some indications that children have become self-regulated learners?

- Children are better able to:
 - Take turns. (*We can share!*)
 - Ask questions to further understanding. (*How big is a baby turtle?*)
 - Communicate ideas clearly. (*That's why it's called a pentagon.*)
 - Plan, make decisions, and communicate. (*Let's make a doctor's office. I'll be the doctor and you be the patient.*)
 - Control their impulses. (*It's okay that you knocked over my building.*)
 - Share information about what they have learned. (*The dinosaur was eighty-five feet long!*)

Glossary

benchmarks: the standards by which something can be judged. Benchmark behaviors are those behaviors that are typical, and against which most behaviors can be measured

developmentally appropriate practices: teaching and learning experiences grounded in the way in which we know that children learn, based on understanding the characteristics of a “typically-developing” child

executive function: all the cognitive processes that help a child behave and think in an organized way

self-regulated learners: children who have learned to manage strong emotions, control impulses, and stay on task with minimum distraction

social competencies: skills needed for successful social interaction; in young children these include making simple decisions, interacting with others in productive ways, and being able to resolve conflicts in appropriate ways (by using their words and negotiating and not being aggressive)

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.