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NAEYC Position Statement

Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8

The purpose of this position statement is to promote excellence in early childhood education by providing a framework for best practice. Grounded both in the research on child development and learning and in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness, the framework outlines practice that promotes young children's optimal learning and development. Since its first adoption in 1986, this framework has been known as *developmentally appropriate practice*.¹

Because of its responsibility to promote quality in the care and education of young children, the profession must regularly revisit the validity and currency of its core knowledge and its positions on issues of practice. When revisiting a position statement, three questions typically arise. Does the position need modification in light of a changed context? Is there new knowledge to inform the statement? Finally, are there aspects of the existing statement that have given rise to misunderstandings and misconceptions needing correction? In developing this 2008 revision, NAEYC invited early childhood educators around the country over several years to share their views on those questions; and in late 2006 the Association convened a working group of respected leaders in the field. The result is this position statement, which addresses the current context and the relevant knowledge base for developmentally appropriate practice and seeks to convey the nature of such practice clearly and usefully.

This position statement comprises the following sections:

- **Critical Issues in the Current Context** focuses on three issues that merit the urgent attention of the early childhood field, because significant changes in the education context have come together with significant new knowledge to open up new possibilities for practice.

DRAFT for Comment

- **Applying New Knowledge to Critical Issues** highlights research offering new knowledge relevant to practice that can help address the three critical issues facing the early childhood field.
- **Core Considerations in Developmentally Appropriate Practice** calls on practitioners to consider what is known (1) about child development and learning, (2) about each individual child, and (3) about children’s social/cultural contexts—and to use this knowledge in generating experiences for children that are both challenging and achievable.
- **Principles of Child Development and Learning That Inform Practice** draws from the research base 12 fundamental generalizations about development and learning that form a solid basis for decision making.
- **Guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice** addresses five key aspects of the teacher’s role: (1) creating a caring community of learners, (2) teaching to enhance development and learning, (3) planning curriculum to achieve important outcomes, (4) assessing children’s learning and development, and (5) establishing reciprocal relationships with families.
- **Policy Considerations** summarizes policies vital in supporting the practices described in this statement.*

This statement is intended to complement NAEYC’s other position statements on practice, which include Early Learning Standards² and Early Childhood Curriculum, Assessment, and Program Evaluation,³ as well as the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria.⁴

Critical Issues in the Current Context

In the past decade, the landscape of early care and education in the United States has changed significantly. In this position statement the focus is on three areas of current challenge with particular relevance for young children’s well-being and learning: reducing learning gaps to enable all children

* Note: The Policy Considerations section of the position statement is not included in this draft.

DRAFT for Comment

to succeed; bringing prekindergarten and elementary education together; and recognizing teacher decision making as vital to educational effectiveness.

Reducing learning gaps to enable all children to succeed

Families, educators, and other citizens look forward with much hope and optimism to the futures that await today's children. Among all these hopes, one that stands out is that the young will achieve in school and go on to successful lives. But educational achievement by the nation's schoolchildren is a matter not only of hope but also of concern. In comparisons with students of other industrialized countries, America's students have not consistently fared well on tests of educational achievement.⁵ In the increasingly global economy, such results have raised concerns about educational outcomes for the U.S. student population as a whole. Even more acute is concern that low-income and African American and Hispanic students lag significantly behind their peers on the standardized comparisons and that they experience more difficulties in school.⁶

By the time they enter school, children with one or more challenging circumstances in their lives—such as poverty, low parent education, or little English spoken in the home—often have considerable ground to make up. They typically enter school with lower levels of foundational skills, such as those in language, reading, and mathematics.⁷ On starting kindergarten, children in the lowest socioeconomic group have average cognitive scores that are 60 percent below those of the most affluent group.⁸ Average math achievement is 21 percent lower for African American children than for white children, and 19 percent lower for Hispanic children than non-Hispanic white.⁹

Behind these differences in school-related proficiencies lie dramatic disparities in children's experiences as a function of socioeconomic group and often of cultural background, as well. These differences begin early. A prime example is language, which is fundamental in literacy development, and indeed, in all areas of children's thinking and learning. Children growing up in low-income families get dramatically less language experience in their homes than do middle-class children.¹⁰ Consequently, by 36 months of age, substantial social-class disparities exist in vocabulary knowledge.¹¹ Because of deep-seated equity issues present in communities and schools, such early achievement gaps tend to increase rather than diminish over time,¹² bringing a mounting sense of failure to children and their families, damaging children's future prospects, and wasting their potential.

DRAFT for Comment

Fortunately, changing young children's experiences can substantially affect child outcomes, especially when intervention starts early in life and is not an isolated action but a broad-gauged set of strategies.¹³ For example, Early Head Start, a comprehensive two-generational program for children under age 3 and their families, has been shown to promote cognitive, language, and social-emotional development.¹⁴ The success of Early Head Start illustrates that high-quality services for infants and toddlers have a long-lasting and positive impact on children's development, learning abilities, and capacity to regulate their emotions.¹⁵

During the preschool years, too, high-quality early childhood programs not surprisingly benefit low-income children more than mediocre or poor programs.¹⁶ Yet, fewer children from low-income families attend high-quality preschool programs than do children from higher-income households.¹⁷ Findings on the impact of teaching quality in the early grades show a similar pattern.¹⁸

The 2001 passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) made it national policy to hold schools accountable for eliminating the persistent gaps in achievement between different groups of children. Aiming to ensure educational equity, the law requires the reporting of scores disaggregated by student group; that is, reported separately for the economically disadvantaged, major racial and ethnic minorities, special education recipients, and English language learners. By shining the light on outcomes by student group, NCLB seeks to make schools accountable for teaching *all* their students effectively. Considerable skepticism exists about whether the legislation can eliminate the achievement gaps, and many critics argue that it has the effect of narrowing the curriculum, puts excessive pressure on teachers and students, and causes other unintended negative consequences for children, teachers, and schools. Persistent criticisms of NCLB notwithstanding, the majority of Americans support its stated goals and high expectations for all children.¹⁹ Debate about how to reach these goals undoubtedly will continue.

Learning standards and accountability have impinged directly on public education from grade K and up, and they are of growing relevance to prekindergarten education, as well. As of 2007, 44 states had "early learning" standards—that is, standards at the prekindergarten level—and the remaining states had begun developing them. Head Start has put in place a "child outcomes framework" that identifies learning expectations in eight domains.²⁰ National reports and public policy statements have supported the creation of standards-based curriculum as part of a broader effort to build school

DRAFT for Comment

readiness by improving teaching and learning in the early years.²¹ For its part, NAEYC adopted position statements supporting high-quality early learning standards, curriculum, and assessment.²²

Given this context, how can we close existing learning gaps and enable all children to succeed? While this question is not a new one, it is the focus of increased attention, and accumulating evidence and innovations in practice now provide guidance for action.

Bringing prekindergarten and elementary education together

Until recent years, the worlds of elementary education and preschool education were largely separate. Each had its funding sources and infrastructure, values, and traditions. At times they cooperated and at times they did not, but generally educators stayed in their respective territories. As forces are now combining to blur the line between the spheres of preschool and K–12 education, there is new impetus to strive for greater continuity and collaboration. One factor is that NCLB-mandated third-grade testing exerts pressures on K–2 schools and teachers,²³ who in turn look to preschool education for help in readying children to demonstrate the required proficiencies.

More than 740,000 children now attend state-funded preschool programs within the public school system. Head Start, serving more than 900,000 children nationwide, is now required to coordinate with the public schools at the state level. For its part, preschool education stands to gain in some respects from a closer relationship with the K–12 system. Given the shortage of affordable, high-quality preschool programs and the low compensation for preschool staff, advocates see potential benefits to having more 4-year-olds, and perhaps even 3-year-olds, served in publicly funded schooling. Proponents also hope that public preK and other steps towards a closer relationship between preschool and K–12 will bring increased attention to content and outcomes and greater continuity and coherence across the preK–3 span.

At the same time, considerable ambivalence exists about the public school system absorbing or radically reshaping preschool education, especially at a time when pressures in public schooling are intense. Many early childhood educators are already quite concerned about the current climate adversely affecting children in grades K–3, and they fear extension of these effects to younger children. Even learning standards, though generally supported in principle in the early childhood world,²⁴ are sometimes questioned in practice because they can have negative effects, as well.

DRAFT for Comment

To be beneficial, standards need to be comprehensive across the learning domains and disciplines, aligned across grade levels, and appropriate to children’s development and learning. Unfortunately, state early learning standards are uneven in these respects. With respect to comprehensiveness, state early learning standards give disproportionate attention to some areas of development and learning and neglect other domains.²⁵ Every state’s standards address language, literacy, mathematics, and other cognitive and academic skills, but states have given less consistent attention to social-emotional development, physical health and development, and productive “approaches to learning” (e.g., curiosity, flexibility, persistence). Moreover, many state standards focus on superficial learning objectives, sometimes underestimating children’s competence; in other cases, states require of young children tasks and understandings that they will be able to grasp more readily when they are older.²⁶

Alignment across grade levels and across states is also at issue. When standards are aligned, the educational experience is more coherent and children are better able to reach key learning goals. Clearly, preschool standards should have continuity with kindergarten standards, and so on. Yet, pressures to align standards for preschool with those for K–12 can influence standards for the younger children in undesirable ways. For example, some prekindergarten standards slight key goals, such as physical and social-emotional development, because these are slighted in the K–3 standards. To be effective, alignment does not consist of making a given year’s standards all about preparing for the next year. Research consistently shows that earlier forms of a behavior often look quite different from its later forms.²⁷ Rather than relying on simplifications of standards for older children, *effective* early learning standards base their content and desired outcomes in research about the processes, sequences, and long-term consequences of early learning and development.²⁸

As for state-to-state alignment, the current situation is chaotic. For the most part, states each have moved to develop their own sets of standards with little coordination, and the result across the nation is a huge, jumbled patchwork. With curriculum and textbook publishers rushing to cover the standards of all the states in their materials, teachers using them often end up teaching a large array of topics, but each only briefly. As children move through the grades over several years, they encounter topics repeatedly but shallowly, rather than getting what they need to focus on and master key learning goals each year.²⁹ The effect is the old story, a curriculum “a mile wide and an inch deep.”

DRAFT for Comment

The resulting overload is overwhelming to teachers and students alike and can lead to potentially problematic teaching practices, at both the preK and K–3 levels. Among these practices of concern are excessive use of rote learning, more lecturing to the whole group, fragmented teaching of discrete objectives, and insistence that teachers follow tightly-paced schedules. There is also concern that schools are curtailing valuable activities ranging from problem solving, rich play, and collaboration with peers to physical activity, outdoor time, and the arts.³⁰

Educators across the whole preK–primary spectrum have perspectives and strengths to bring to a closer collaboration and ongoing conversation, and the time is ripe for such mutual learning and the blending of the best practices from both worlds.³¹ From the preK side, recent research has confirmed the importance of elements that have tended to be strong in early childhood education—an environment in which children develop physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively through supportive teacher-child relationships and active, meaningful, and connected learning experiences.³² From the primary side, research also has shown the value of elements that have tended to be prominent in K–3 classrooms—notably, emphasis on subject content and on those skills that predict later school success.³³

The growing knowledge base can shed light on what a blending of best practices might look like.³⁴ As educators across settings and age groups increase their communication and collaboration, it seems likely that they will learn much that contributes to improving the educational experiences of all young children and making those experiences more coherent. Thus, both opportunities and risks exist in the new education environment.

Recognizing teacher decision making as vital to educational effectiveness

In today's schools, many teachers report that they have less scope for decision making than they did in the past.³⁵ Certainly, the standards movement has provided much-needed guidance about what children should know and be able to do. The question of how much autonomy teachers need is under debate. Determining the most effective amount of top-down direction to provide to schools and teachers is challenging under any circumstances. But under a mandate for swift improvement of student outcomes, many policymakers and administrators gravitate to the hope that directives on curriculum, lessons, and schedules can “teacher proof” and expedite the enterprise.

DRAFT for Comment

Although this reaction is understandable, it tends to cause more problems than it solves. Teaching and learning are too complex and individual to allow for prescribing every teacher action in advance. Rather, skilled decision making lies at the heart of effective teaching. Children benefit when teachers have the expertise to act as decision makers and are empowered to do so. The best approach is not to attempt to teacher-proof the curriculum—although resources and scaffolding for teachers are important—but to give them the necessary professional development and supports to be informed decision makers and skilled practitioners.³⁶

Whether teacher-constructed or generated outside the school and then adapted by teachers, good curriculum is a vital step towards effective instruction. But it is only the first step. A significant research base demonstrates that the most influential variables in achieving positive learning outcomes are embedded in teachers' interactions with children, in the real-time decisions that they make throughout the day.³⁷ The way teachers design a learning experience, the questions they ask, how they respond to children's actions, the feedback they give—these matter greatly in children's learning, and none can be fully determined in advance and laid out in a curriculum product or set of lesson plans. Teachers will always have moment-by-moment decisions to make. To make these with well-grounded intentionality, they need to have knowledge about child development and learning in general, about their individual children, and about the sequences in which a domain's specific concepts and skills are learned. Teachers also need to have a well-developed repertoire of teaching strategies to employ for different purposes.³⁸

Emphasizing the importance of teacher decision making does not imply that the sole responsibility for providing high-quality education rests on the shoulders of the teacher. Teachers, like children, need supports and scaffolding to achieve at high levels. For example, good curriculum resources are helpful when they specify the key skills and concepts for children and provide a degree of teaching guidance, but without overscripting. New teachers and those encountering a new curriculum or set of standards may be particularly in need of such scaffolding.³⁹

Another valuable form of scaffolding for teachers is interaction with mentors and peers. To meet the needs of diverse learners and help all children to achieve desired outcomes requires significant time for teachers to collaborate with colleagues, discuss and observe best practices, and participate in meaningful professional development. Most teachers, including novice teachers, get too little time for

DRAFT for Comment

such activities. While providing time and opportunity for teachers to do these things can be very challenging for administrators, it is vital.⁴⁰

Applying New Knowledge to Critical Issues

Continual growth of new knowledge enables the early childhood field to refine, redirect, or confirm understandings of best practice. The whole of the present statement reflects fresh evidence of recent years and the perspectives and priorities emerging from these findings. This section looks within that mass of new knowledge to a few lines of research specifically helpful in addressing the changes and challenges in the education context that we have identified as critical issues for the field.

New findings hold promise for reducing learning gaps and increasing the achievement of all children. Research continues to confirm the greater efficacy of early action, and in some cases, intensive intervention, as compared with remediation and other “too little” or “too late” approaches. In addition, more is now known about which competencies enable young children to acquire key knowledge and skills. Such findings are useful in determining curriculum content and sequences for all children. But they are especially vital in helping those children who are most likely to begin school behind their peers and to fall farther behind with time, including children of color, children growing up in poverty, and English language learners.

In particular, research has identified a number of early predictors of key learning outcomes and school success. Some predict success in traditionally academic areas, particularly language/literacy and mathematics; others predict dimensions of social and emotional competence and cognitive functioning related to how children fare in school. Across this full range of predictors, research also provides guidance to teachers in fostering foundational skills and abilities.

A sizable literature identifies factors that relate to later literacy and mathematics learning. Vocabulary and oral language are important predictors⁴¹ of children’s reading comprehension. Even when children with limited vocabulary manage to acquire basic decoding skills, they still often encounter difficulty around grade 3 or 4 when they begin needing to read more advanced text in various subjects.⁴² Then their vocabulary deficit impedes comprehension, and thus their acquiring of knowledge necessary to succeed across the curriculum.⁴³

DRAFT for Comment

Children from low-income families typically lag significantly in vocabulary and language development and get dramatically less language experience at home compared with their middle-class peers.⁴⁴ To shrink the achievement gap, early childhood programs need to start early with proactive vocabulary development to bring children—including those from non-English-speaking and less verbal families—closer to the developmental trajectory of children from educated, middle-class families.⁴⁵ For such vocabulary gains, as well as the advanced linguistic structures needed for elementary-grade reading, teachers need to engage young children in language interactions throughout the day, including reading to them in small groups and talking with them about the stories. Especially rich in linguistic payoff is extended discourse; that is, conversation on a given topic sustained over many exchanges.⁴⁶

A decade ago, many preschool teachers did not see it as their role to teach children of that age group the alphabet and letter sounds. Since then, compelling evidence has shown that young children's alphabet knowledge and phonological awareness are significant predictors of their later proficiency in reading and writing.⁴⁷ Consequently, the early childhood profession stresses literacy as a vital part of the early childhood curriculum,⁴⁸ although literacy instruction in many classrooms still needs substantial improvement.

As in literacy, mathematics education in the early childhood years is key to increasing all children's school readiness and to closing the achievement gap.⁴⁹ For example, preschoolers' knowledge of numbers and their sequence strongly predicts not only math learning but also literacy skills.⁵⁰ Yet mathematics typically gets very little attention in preschools.⁵¹ One reason is that early childhood teachers themselves often lack the skills and confidence to expand their emphasis on math.⁵²

Mathematical and literacy concepts and skills—and, indeed, robust content *across* the curriculum—can be taught to young children in ways that are engaging and developmentally appropriate.⁵³ But to do that, preschool education must be strengthened. Failing to meet this challenge to improve all children's readiness and achievement will perpetuate the inequities of achievement gaps and the low performance of the U.S. student population as a whole.

Another major thread in recent research is that social and emotional competencies (and aspects that cut across social-emotional and cognitive functioning) predict how children fare in the classroom. Of

DRAFT for Comment

course, children's social, emotional, and behavioral adjustment is important in its own right, both in and out of school. It now appears that some variables in these domains also connect to cognitively oriented outcomes that predict school success. For instance, studies have linked emotional competence to both enhanced cognitive performance and academic achievement.⁵⁴ A number of factors in the emotional and social domains, such as independence, responsibility, self-regulation, and cooperation, predict how well children make the transition to school and how they fare in the early grades.⁵⁵

A particularly powerful variable is self-regulation, which early childhood educators have long emphasized as a prime developmental goal for the preschool and kindergarten years.⁵⁶ Mounting research evidence confirms this importance, indicating that self-regulation in young children predicts their later functioning in areas such as problem solving, planning, focused attention, and metacognition, and thus contributes to their school success.⁵⁷ Moreover, helping children from difficult life circumstances to develop strong self-regulatory abilities has proven to be both feasible and influential in preparing them to succeed in school.⁵⁸

All these findings are illustrative of a substantial literature that provides a broad outline for what features and priorities preK *and* K–3 education need to incorporate for each to become stronger, and together to build a coordinated continuum of learning, especially for the 3–8 age span.⁵⁹ Evidence suggests that such a continuous system should include a number of aspects traditionally valued highly in early care and education (for ages 0–5) and often slighted in the primary grades. Among these emphases are social and emotional competence, play, physical activity, the arts, and partnering with families. The system also should include some emphases traditionally more prevalent in the primary grades, such as robust curriculum content and sequences of learning.

Key in developing a continuous, coherent framework that goes from prekindergarten through third grade is aligning standards, curricula, and assessment practices within that continuum.⁶⁰ Discussion and investigation of how learning experiences can be systematically organized to complement one another are beginning⁶¹ and hold promise for coordinated and improved preK–3 education.

Pivotal in all efforts to improve outcomes for children from birth to age 8 is the role of the teacher, well documented in the research literature.⁶² The importance of teachers to high-quality early care and

DRAFT for Comment

education, indeed to all of education, cannot be overemphasized. As described in the previous section of this statement, the research on critical factors in good teaching has powerful lessons to offer.

First, although administrative and education decisions upstream from the teacher are extremely influential in what goes on in the classroom, it is the teacher's classroom plans and organization, sensitivity and responsiveness to the children, and moment-to-moment interactions with them that most determine learning outcomes.⁶³ Thus, no educational strategy that fails to recognize the centrality of the teacher can be successful. Directly following from this first lesson is a second: the imperative to make developing teacher quality and effectiveness a top priority. That investment must include excellent preservice preparation, ongoing professional development, and on-the-ground support and mentoring.

Core Considerations in Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Every day, early childhood practitioners make a great many decisions, both long-term and short-term. As they do so, they need to keep in mind the identified goals for children's learning and development and be intentional in helping children achieve these outcomes. The core of developmentally appropriate practice lies in this intentionality, the knowledge practitioners consider when they are making decisions, and that they always aim for goals that are both challenging and achievable for children.

Knowledge to consider in making decisions

In all aspects of their work with children, early childhood practitioners must consider these three areas of knowledge:

- 1. What is known about child development and learning**—referring to knowledge of age-related characteristics that permits general predictions about what experiences are likely to best promote children's learning and development.

Teachers who are knowledgeable about child development and learning are able to make broad predictions about what children of a particular age group typically will be like, what they typically will and won't be capable of, and what strategies and approaches will most likely promote their

DRAFT for Comment

optimal learning and development. With this knowledge, teachers can make preliminary decisions with some confidence about environment, materials, interactions, and activities. At the same time, their knowledge also tells them that specific groups of children and the individual children in any group always will be the same in some ways but different in others.

2. What is known about each child as an individual—referring to what practitioners learn about each child that has implications for how best to adapt for and be responsive to that individual variation.

To be effective, teachers must get to know each child in the group well. They do this using a variety of methods—such as observation, interactions, examination of children’s work, and talking with families. From this information, teachers make plans and adjustments to promote each child’s individual development and learning as fully as possible. Developmental variation among children is the norm; but any one child’s progress also will vary across domains and disciplines, contexts, and time. Children differ in many other respects, too—in their strengths, interests, preferences, personalities and approaches to learning, knowledge and skills based on prior experiences, and more. Children may also have special learning needs; sometimes these have been diagnosed and sometimes they have not. Responding to each child individually is fundamental to developmentally appropriate practice.

3. What is known about the social and cultural contexts in which children live—referring to the values, expectations, and behaviors that practitioners must strive to understand in order to ensure that learning experiences are meaningful, relevant, and respectful for each child and family.

As we grow up in a family and in a broader social and cultural community, we all come to certain understandings about what our group considers appropriate, values, expects, admires. We learn this through direct teaching from our parents and other important people in our lives and through observing the behavior of those around us. Among these understandings we absorb “rules” about behaviors—such as how to show respect, how to interact with people we know well and those we have just met, how to regard time and personal space, how to dress, and countless other attitudes and actions. We typically absorb these rules very early and very deeply, so we live by them with little conscious thought. When young children are in a group setting outside the home, what makes sense to

DRAFT for Comment

them and how they experience this world depend on the social and cultural contexts to which they are accustomed. Skilled teachers take such contextual factors into account, along with the children's age and their purely individual differences, in shaping all aspects of the learning environment.

To recap this decision-making process: An effective teacher begins by thinking about what children of the age (and developmental status) represented in the group are like typically. This knowledge provides a general idea of the activities, routines, interactions, and curriculum that will be effective with them. The teacher also must consider each child, including looking at each child individually and within the context of family, community, culture, social group, past experience (including learning and behavior), and current circumstances. Only then can the teacher see children *as they are* to make decisions that are developmentally appropriate for each of them.

Challenging *and* achievable goals

Meeting learners where they are is essential, but no good teacher simply leaves them there. Keeping in mind desired outcomes and what is known about the children as a group and individually, the teacher plans experiences to promote children's learning and development.

Learning is most likely to occur when experiences build on what a child already knows and is able to do, and also entail the child stretching a reasonable amount in acquiring new skills or knowledge. After the child reaches that new level of mastery in skill or understanding, the teacher reflects on what goals should come next; and the cycle of planning, challenging, supporting, and achieving continues, advancing children's learning in a developmentally appropriate way.

Clearly, such effective teaching does not happen by chance. A hallmark of developmentally appropriate teaching is intentionality. Good teachers are intentional in everything they do—setting up the classroom, planning curriculum, making use of various teaching strategies, assessing children, interacting with them, and working with their families. They are able to use a variety of strategies. Intentional teachers are purposeful and thoughtful about the actions they take, and they direct their pedagogy toward the outcomes the program is trying to help children reach.

DRAFT for Comment

Principles of Child Development and Learning That Inform Practice

Developmentally appropriate practice as defined in this position statement is *not* based on what we think might be true or what we want to believe about young children. Developmentally appropriate practice is informed by what we *know* from the research literature about how children develop and learn. In particular, a review of that literature yields a number of well-supported generalizations, or *principles*.

No linear listing of principles—including the one below—can do justice to the complexity of the phenomenon that is child development and learning. While the list is comprehensive, it certainly is not all-inclusive. Each principle describes an individually contributing factor; but just as all domains of development and learning are interrelated, so too do the principles interconnect. For example, the influence of cultural differences and individual differences, each highlighted in a separate principle below, cuts across all the other principles. That is, the implication of any principle often differs as a function of cultural or individual givens.

A complete discussion of the knowledge base that informs developmentally appropriate practice is clearly beyond the scope of this document. Each of the following principles rests on a very extensive research base that is only partially referenced here.⁶⁴

All these limitations of such a list notwithstanding, collectively the principles that follow form a solid basis for decision making—for decisions at all levels about how best to meet the needs of young children *in general*, and for decisions by teachers, programs, and families about the needs of individual children *in particular*.

1. All the domains of development and learning—physical, social, emotional, and cognitive—are important, and they are closely interrelated. Children’s development and learning in one domain influence and are influenced by what takes place in other domains.

Children are thinking, moving, feeling, and interacting human beings. To teach them well involves considering and fostering their development and learning in all domains.⁶⁵ Because this full spectrum

DRAFT for Comment

of development and learning is fundamental to children's lives and to their future participation as members of society, early care and education must comprise all the domains.

Further, changes in one domain often facilitate or limit development in other areas.⁶⁶ For example, when babies begin to crawl or walk, they gain new possibilities for exploring the world, and their mobility affects both their cognitive development and sense of autonomy. Likewise, children's language development influences their ability to participate in social interaction with adults and other children; such interactions, in turn, support their further language development.⁶⁷ A growing body of work demonstrates the relationship between emotional and social factors and children's academic competence⁶⁸ and thus the importance of all these areas in educating young children. In brief, the knowledge base documents the importance of a comprehensive curriculum and the interrelatedness of the developmental domains in children's well-being and success.

2. Many aspects of children's learning and development follow well-documented sequences, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired.

Human development research suggests that relatively stable, predictable sequences of growth and change occur in children during the first nine years of life.⁶⁹ Predictable changes occur in all domains of development, although the ways that these changes are manifested and the meaning attached to them may vary widely in different cultural contexts.⁷⁰ Knowledge of how children within a given age span typically develop and learn provides a general framework to guide teachers in preparing the learning environment, considering curriculum, designing learning experiences, and teaching and interacting with children.

Also important for educators to know are the sequences in which children learn specific concepts and skills, building on prior knowledge and skills. In mathematics, for example, children's learning to count serves as an important foundation for their acquiring an understanding of numerals.⁷¹ Familiarity with known learning sequences should inform curriculum development and teaching practice.

3. Development and learning proceed at varying rates from child to child, as well as at uneven rates across different areas of a child's individual functioning.

DRAFT for Comment

Individual variation has at least two dimensions: the inevitable variability around the average or normative course of development and the uniqueness of each person as an individual. Each child's development follows individual patterns and timing; individuals also vary in temperament, personality, and aptitudes, as well as what they learn in their families and within the culture or cultures that shape their lives.

All children have their own strengths, needs, and interests. Given the enormous variation among children of the same chronological age, a child's age is only a crude index of developmental abilities and interests. For children who have special learning needs or abilities, additional efforts and resources may be necessary to optimize development and learning. Given this range of variation among children, decisions about curriculum, teaching, and interactions with them should be as individualized as possible. Rigid expectations of group norms do not reflect what is known about real differences in development and learning. At the same time, having high expectations for all children is essential, as are using the strategies and providing the resources necessary to help them meet these expectations.

4. Development and learning result from a dynamic and continuous interaction of biological maturation and experience.

Development is the result of the interplay between the growing, changing child and the child's experiences in the social and physical worlds.⁷² For example, a child's genetic makeup may predict healthy growth, but inadequate nutrition in the early years of life will keep this potential from being fulfilled. Or, the impact of a severe disability on a young child's learning and development can be minimized through systematic, individualized intervention. Likewise, a child's inherited temperament—such as a predisposition to be either wary or outgoing—shapes and is shaped by how other children and adults interact with that child. In light of the power of biology and the effects of children's prior experiences and their lives outside the program, it is important for early childhood educators to maintain high expectations and employ all their knowledge, ingenuity, and persistence to find ways to help every child succeed.

5. Early experiences have profound effects, both cumulative and delayed, on a child's development and learning; and optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning to occur.

DRAFT for Comment

Children's early experiences, whether positive or negative, are cumulative. For example, a child's social experiences with other children in the preschool years may help him develop social skills and confidence that enable him to make friends in subsequent years, and these experiences further enhance the child's social competence and academic achievement. Conversely, children who fail to develop minimal social skills and thus suffer neglect or rejection from peers are at risk for later outcomes such as school dropout, delinquency, and mental health problems.⁷³ Intervention and support will be more successful the earlier a problem is addressed. For example, the cumulative effects of early experience are also clearly evident in the greater difficulty and expense required for remediation of reading difficulties as compared with what is necessary for their prevention.⁷⁴

Besides prevention being more effective than later remediation, the literature also shows that some aspects of development occur most efficiently at certain points in the life span. The first three years of life, for example, appear to be an optimal period for oral language development.⁷⁵ Ensuring that children have the environmental inputs needed for a particular kind of learning and development at its "prime time" is always the most reliable route to desired outcomes.

6. Development proceeds toward greater complexity, self-regulation, and symbolic or representational capacities.

A pervasive characteristic of development is that children's functioning becomes increasingly complex—in language, social interaction, physical movement, problem solving, and virtually every other domain. Increased organization and memory capacity of the developing brain make it possible with age for children to combine simple routines into more complex strategies.⁷⁶

All young humans must negotiate the transition from total dependence on others at birth to competence and internal control, including learning to regulate their emotions, behaviors, and attention. For young infants, there are tasks such as learning to soothe themselves from arousal to a settled state. A few years later, self-regulation means developing the capacity to manage strong emotions and keep one's attention focused. Throughout the early years, adults play significant roles in helping children learn to self-regulate. Caregivers are important in helping very young children to modulate their emotional arousal; for example, soothing babies and then helping them learn to soothe themselves.⁷⁷ In the preschool years, teachers can help children develop self-regulation by scaffolding

DRAFT for Comment

high-level dramatic play,⁷⁸ helping children learn to express their emotions, and engaging children in planning and decision making.⁷⁹

During the early years of life, children move from sensory or behavioral responses to symbolic or representational knowledge.⁸⁰ For example, children are able to navigate their homes and other familiar settings long before they can understand the words *left* and *right* or read a map of the house. A major change happens at around age 2, when children begin to represent and reconstruct their experiences and knowledge.⁸¹ For example, children may use one object to stand for another in play, such as a block for a phone or a spoon for a guitar.⁸² Their ability to use various modes and media to convey their meaning increases in range and scope. Over the preschool years, these modes may include oral language, gestures and body movement, visual arts (drawing, painting, sculpting), construction, dramatic play, and writing. Further, their efforts to represent their ideas and concepts in any of these modes enhance the knowledge itself.⁸³

7. Children develop best when they have secure, consistent relationships with responsive adults and opportunities for positive relationships with peers.

From the earliest years of life, warm, nurturing relationships with responsive adults are necessary for many key areas of children's development, including empathy and cooperation, self-regulation and cultural socialization, language and communication, peer relationships, and identity formation.⁸⁴

When children and caring adults have the opportunity to get to know each other well, they learn to predict each other's signals and behavior and establish attunement and trust.⁸⁵ The first and most important relationships are those the child forms with parents or other primary caregivers. Forming one or more such attachments sets the stage for other relationships, as children move into the wider world beyond their immediate family.⁸⁶ Young children benefit from opportunities to develop ongoing, trusting relationships with adults outside the family and with other children. Notably, positive teacher-child relationships promote children's learning and achievement, as well as social competence and emotional development.⁸⁷

Nurturing relationships are vital in fostering in children high self-esteem and a strong sense of self-efficacy, capacity in resolving interpersonal conflicts cooperatively, and the sociability to connect with others and form friendships. Further, by providing positive models and the security and

DRAFT for Comment

confidence to try new experiences and skills, such relationships support children's learning and the acquisition of numerous capabilities.⁸⁸

8. Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts.

Understanding children's development requires viewing each child within the sociocultural context of that child's family, educational setting, and community, as well as within the broader society.⁸⁹ These various contexts are interrelated, and all powerfully influence the developing child. For example, even a child in a loving, supportive family within a strong, healthy community is affected by the biases of the larger society, such as racism or sexism, and may show some effects of its negative stereotyping and discrimination.

Here *culture* is intended to refer to the customary beliefs and patterns of behavior, both explicit and implicit, that are inculcated by the society, or by a social, religious, or ethnic group within the society, in its members. Even though culture is discussed often in the context of diversity and immigrant or minority groups, all of us are members of cultures and are powerfully influenced by them. Every culture structures and interprets children's behavior and development in its own way.⁹⁰ Early childhood teachers need to understand the influence of sociocultural contexts on learning, recognize children's developing competence, and be familiar with the variety of ways that children may demonstrate their developmental achievements.⁹¹ Most importantly, educators need to be sensitive to how their own cultural experience shapes their perspective and to realize that multiple perspectives, not just their own, must be considered in decisions about children's development and learning.

As children grow up, they need to learn to function well in the society and the increasingly global economy and to move comfortably among groups of people from backgrounds both similar and dissimilar to their own. Fortunately, children are capable of learning to function in more than one cultural or linguistic context and to make behavioral or linguistic shifts as they move from one context to another, although this complex ability does not occur overnight and requires adult support. Further, children's familiarity with a new language or culture can be additive, rather than leading to displacement of the child's first language and culture.⁹²

DRAFT for Comment**9. Always mentally active in seeking to understand the world around them, children learn in a variety of ways; a wide range of teaching strategies and interactions are effective in supporting all these kinds of learning.**

Several prominent theories and bodies of research view intellectual development from the constructivist, interactive perspective.⁹³ Young children gain knowledge of the world from teachers, family members, peers and older children, and even the media. Children take such input, along with what they learn in the course of their own experiences, and work out their own understandings and hypotheses about the world. They try these out through interactions with adults and other children, physical manipulation, play, and their own thought processes—observing what happens, reflecting on their findings, imagining possibilities, asking questions, and formulating answers. When children make knowledge their own in these ways, their understanding is deeper and they can transfer and apply their learning in new contexts.⁹⁴

Using multiple teaching strategies is important in meeting children's different learning needs. The *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers* report⁹⁵ concluded:

Good teachers acknowledge and encourage children's efforts, model and demonstrate, create challenges and support children in extending their capabilities, and provide specific directions or instruction. All of these teaching strategies can be used in the context of play and structured activities. Effective teachers also organize the classroom environment and plan ways to pursue educational goals for each child as opportunities arise in child-initiated activities and in activities planned and initiated by the teacher.

Thus, children benefit when teachers have at their disposal a wide range of teaching strategies; and from these, teachers select the best strategy to use in a situation, depending on the learning goal, specific context, and needs of individual children at that moment.

10. Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as promoting language, cognition, and social competence.

Children of all ages love to play, and it gives them opportunities to explore the world, interact with others, express and control emotions, develop their symbolic and problem-solving abilities, and practice emerging skills. Research shows the links between play and foundational capacities such as memory, self-regulation, oral language abilities, social skills, and success in school.⁹⁶

DRAFT for Comment

Children engage in various kinds of play, such as physical play, object play, pretend or dramatic play, constructive play, and games with rules. Observed in all young animals, play apparently serves important functions for humans and other species, and each kind of play has its own benefits and characteristics. From infancy, children act on the world around them for the pleasure of seeing what happens; for example, repeatedly dropping a spoon on the floor or pulling the cat's tail. At around age 2, children begin to demonstrate symbolic use of objects—for instance, picking up a shell and pretending to drink as from a cup—at least when they have had opportunities to observe others engaging in such make-believe behavior.⁹⁷

From such beginnings, preschool children begin to engage in more mature forms of dramatic play, in which they act out specific roles, interact with one another in their roles, and plan how the play will go. Such play is influential in developing self-regulation, as children are highly motivated to stick to the roles and rules of the play, and thus grow in the ability to inhibit their impulses, coordinate with others, and make plans.⁹⁸ High-level dramatic play produces documented cognitive, social, and emotional benefits.⁹⁹ However, with children spending more time in adult-directed activities and media use, forms of child play characterized by imagination and rich social interactions seem to be declining.¹⁰⁰ Active scaffolding of imaginative play is needed in early childhood settings if children are to develop the sustained, mature dramatic play that contributes significantly to their self-regulation and other cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional benefits. Adults can use proven methods to promote children's extended engagement in make-believe play, as well as in games with rules and other kinds of high-level play.¹⁰¹

11. Development and learning advance when children are challenged to achieve at a level just beyond their current mastery, and also when they have many opportunities to practice newly acquired skills.

Human beings, especially children, are motivated to understand or do what is just beyond their current understanding or mastery.¹⁰² Effective teachers create a rich learning environment to activate that motivation and they make use of strategies to promote children's undertaking and mastering of new and progressively more advanced challenges.¹⁰³

In a task just beyond a child's independent reach, adults and more-competent peers contribute significantly to the child's development by providing the support or assistance that allows the child to

DRAFT for Comment

succeed. Once children make this stretch to a new level in a supportive context, they go on to use the skill independently and in a variety of contexts, laying the foundation for the next challenge.

Provision of such support, often called *scaffolding*,¹⁰⁴ is a key feature of effective teaching.¹⁰⁵

At the same time, research demonstrates that children need to be successful at that learning much of the time—perhaps as much as 70 to 80 percent of the time¹⁰⁶—in order for their motivation and persistence to be maintained.¹⁰⁷ Confronted by repeated failure, most children will simply stop trying. Repeated opportunity to practice and consolidate new skills and concepts is also essential in order for children to reach the threshold of mastery at which they can go on to use this knowledge or skill and apply it in new situations. Young children engage in a great deal of practice in play and other child-guided contexts.¹⁰⁸

To set challenging, achievable goals for children and to provide the right amount and type of scaffolding require knowledge of child development and learning, including familiarity with the paths and sequences that children are known to follow in acquiring specific skills, concepts, and abilities. This knowledge, along with close observation of children, allows teachers to match curriculum and teaching experiences to children’s emerging competencies so as to challenge but not frustrate them.

12. Children’s experiences shape their motivation and approaches to learning, such as persistence, initiative, and flexibility; in turn, these dispositions and behaviors affect their learning and development.

The National Education Goals Panel and its Goal One Technical Planning Group identified “approaches to learning” as one of five aspects of school readiness.¹⁰⁹ Focused on the *how* rather than the *what* of learning, approaches to learning involve both children’s feelings about learning—their interest, pleasure, and motivation to learn—and their behavior when learning, including attention, persistence, flexibility, and self-regulation.¹¹⁰

Even in the early years, children differ in their approaches to learning. These differences may influence children’s school readiness and school success. For example, children who start school more eager to learn tend to do better in reading and mathematics than do less motivated children.¹¹¹ Children with more positive learning behaviors, such as initiative, attention, and persistence, later develop stronger language skills.¹¹² Moreover, children with greater self-regulation and other

DRAFT for Comment

“learning-related skills” in kindergarten are more skilled in reading and mathematics in later grades.¹¹³

Although temperament and other inherent differences may affect children’s approaches to learning, their experiences in families and early education programs have a major influence. Programs can implement evidence-based strategies that will promote positive approaches to learning. These include strengthening relationships with children; working with families; and selecting effective curriculum, assessments, and teaching methods.¹¹⁴

Guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Practices that are developmentally appropriate are a product of the myriad decisions at all levels made by policymakers, administrators, teachers, and families about the care and education of young children. Effective early childhood professionals draw on all the principles of child development and learning outlined, as well as the knowledge base on effective practices in early care and education, and they apply the information in their practice.

The following guidelines address decisions that early childhood professionals make in the five key (and interrelated) areas of practice: (1) creating a caring community of learners, (2) teaching to enhance learning and development, (3) planning curriculum to achieve important outcomes, (4) assessing children’s development and learning, and (5) establishing reciprocal relationships with families.

The word *teacher* is intended to refer to any adult responsible for the direct care and education of a group of children in any early childhood setting. Included are not only classroom teachers but also infant/toddler caregivers, family child care providers, and specialists in other disciplines who fulfill the role of teacher. *Practitioners* includes an early childhood setting’s teachers and administrators.

1. Creating a caring community of learners

In developmentally appropriate practice, practitioners create and foster a “community of learners” that supports *all* children to develop and learn. The role of the community is to provide a physical,

DRAFT for Comment

emotional, and cognitive environment conducive to learning. The foundation for the community is consistent, positive, caring relationships between the adults and children, among children, among teachers, and between teachers and families. It is the responsibility of all community members to consider and contribute to one another's well-being and learning.

- A. Each member of the community is valued by the others. By observing and participating in the community, children learn about themselves and their world and also how to develop positive, constructive relationships with other people. Children learn to respect and acknowledge differences of all kinds and to value each person.

- B. Relationships are an important context for learning. Children construct their understandings about the world around them through interactions with other members of the community (both adults and peers). Each child has unique strengths, interests, and perspectives to contribute. Opportunities to play together, collaborate on investigations and projects, and talk with other children and adults enhance children's development and learning. Interacting with others in small groups provides a context for children to extend their thinking, build on each other's ideas, and cooperate to solve problems. (Also see "**Establishing Reciprocal Relationships with Families.**")

- C. Each member of the community respects and is accountable to the others to behave in a way that is conducive to the learning and well-being of all.
 - 1. Teachers help children develop responsibility and self-regulation. Recognizing that such abilities and behaviors develop with experience and time, teachers consider how to foster such development in their interactions with each child and in their curriculum planning.
 - 2. Teachers are responsible at all times for all children under their supervision, monitoring, anticipating, preventing, and redirecting behaviors not conducive to learning or disrespectful of the community, as well as teaching prosocial behaviors.
 - 3. Teachers set clear and reasonable limits on children's behavior and apply those limits consistently. Teachers help children be accountable to themselves and to others for their behavior. In the case of preschool and older children, teachers engage children in developing their own community rules for behavior.

DRAFT for Comment

4. Teachers listen to and acknowledge children's feelings and frustrations, respond with respect, guide children to resolve conflicts, and model skills that help children to solve their own problems.
 5. In their interactions with other adults (colleagues, family members) and with children, teachers themselves demonstrate high levels of responsibility and self-regulation.
- D.** Practitioners design and maintain the physical environment to protect the health and safety of community members, specifically in support of young children's physiological needs for activity, sensory stimulation, fresh air, rest, and nourishment. The daily schedule provides a balance of rest and active movement. Outdoor experiences, including opportunities to interact with the natural world, are provided for children of all ages.
- E.** Practitioners ensure members of the community feel psychologically safe. The overall social and emotional climate is positive.
1. Interactions among community members (administrators, teachers, families, children), as well as the experiences provided by the teacher, leave participants feeling secure, relaxed, and comfortable rather than disengaged, frightened, worried, or unduly stressed.
 2. Enthusiasm and enjoyment are fostered both in learning and in interactions among community members.
 3. Teachers ensure that the environment is organized and the schedule follows an orderly routine that provides a stable structure within which learning can take place. While the environment's elements are dynamic and changing, overall it still is predictable and comprehensible from a child's point of view.

2. Teaching to enhance development and learning

From birth, a child's relationships and interactions with adults are critical determinants of development and learning. At the same time, children are active constructors of their own understanding of the world around them. As such, they benefit from initiating and regulating their own learning activities and from interacting with peers. Developmentally appropriate teaching practices provide an optimal balance of adult-guided and child-guided experiences. "*Adult-guided* experiences proceed primarily along the lines of the teacher's goals, but also are shaped by the

DRAFT for Comment

children's active engagement; *child-guided* experiences proceed primarily along the lines of children's interests and actions, with strategic teacher support."¹¹⁵ But whether the experience is adult- or child-guided, in developmentally appropriate practice it is the teacher who takes responsibility for stimulating, directing, and supporting children's development and learning by providing the experiences that each child needs to acquire important knowledge and skills.

- A. Teachers are responsible for fostering the caring learning community through their teaching.
- B. Teachers make it a priority to know each child well, and also the people most significant in the child's life.
 - 1. Teachers establish positive, personal relationships with each child and with each child's family, to better understand that child's individual needs, interests, styles, and abilities and that family's goals, values, expectations, and childrearing practices. (Also see "**Establishing Reciprocal Relationships with Families.**") Teachers listen to each child and use this understanding to adapt their responses accordingly.
 - 2. Teachers continually gather information about children in a variety of ways, including observing as the child interacts with the learning environment and with adults and peers, monitoring the child's learning and development, to make plans to help the child progress.
 - 3. Teachers are alert to signs of undue stress and traumatic events in each child's life and employ strategies to reduce stress and support the development of resilience.
- C. Teachers take responsibility for knowing what the desired outcomes for the program are and how the program's curriculum is intended to achieve those outcomes. They carry out that curriculum through their teaching in ways that are geared to young children in general and these children in particular, including the sequences in which children learn specific concepts and skills by building on prior knowledge and skills. (Also see "**Planning Curriculum to Achieve Important Outcomes.**")
- D. Teachers plan for learning experiences that effectively implement a comprehensive curriculum, so that children attain key goals across the domains (physical, social, emotional, cognitive) and across the disciplines (including language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, physical education, and health).

DRAFT for Comment

- E.** Teachers organize an environment that will promote each child's learning and development.
1. Teachers arrange firsthand, meaningful experiences that are intellectually and creatively stimulating, invite exploration and investigation, and engage children's active, sustained involvement. They do this by providing a rich variety of materials, challenges, and ideas that are worthy of children's attention.
 2. Teachers present children with opportunities to make meaningful choices, especially in child-choice activity periods. They assist and guide children who are not yet able to enjoy and make good use of such periods.
 3. Teachers organize the daily and weekly schedule to provide children with extended blocks of time in which to engage in sustained play, investigation, exploration, and interaction (with adults and peers).
- F.** Teachers possess an extensive repertoire of skills and strategies they are able to draw on, and they know how and when to choose among them, to effectively promote each child's learning and development at that moment. Those strategies include, but are not limited to, acknowledging, encouraging, giving specific feedback, modeling, demonstrating, adding challenge, giving cues or other assistance, providing information, and giving directions.
1. To help children develop initiative, teachers encourage them to choose and plan their own learning activities.
 2. To stimulate children's thinking and extend their learning, teachers pose problems, ask questions, and make comments and suggestions.
 3. To extend the range of children's interests and the scope of their thought, teachers present novel experiences and introduce stimulating ideas, problems, experiences, or hypotheses.
 4. To adjust the complexity and challenge of activities to suit children's level of skill and knowledge, teachers increase the challenge as children gain competence and understanding.
 5. To strengthen children's sense of competence and confidence as learners, motivation to persist, and willingness to take risks, teachers provide experiences for children to be genuinely successful and to be challenged.

DRAFT for Comment

6. To enhance children’s conceptual understanding, teachers use various strategies that encourage children to reflect on and “revisit” their experiences.
7. To encourage and foster children’s learning and development, teachers avoid generic praise (“Good job”) and instead give specific feedback (“You got the same number when you counted the beans again”).

G. Teachers know how and when to *scaffold* children’s learning—i.e., providing just enough assistance to enable each child to perform at a skill level just beyond what the child can do on his or her own, then gradually reducing the support as the child begins to master the skill, and setting the stage for the next challenge.

1. Teachers recognize that in any group, children’s skills will vary and they will need different levels of support. Teachers also know that any one child’s level of skill and need for support will vary over time.
2. Scaffolding can take a variety of forms; for example, giving the child a hint, adding a cue, or modeling the skill. It also can be provided in a variety of contexts, including scaffolding in play, daily routines, and outdoor activities, as well in planned learning experiences.
3. Teachers can provide the scaffolding (e.g., the teacher models the skill) or peers can (e.g., the child’s learning buddy models); in either case, it is the teacher who recognizes each child’s need for supports and assistance.

H. Teachers know how and when to use the various learning formats and contexts most strategically.

1. Teachers understand that each of several major learning formats (e.g., large groups, small groups, learning centers, and routines) has its own characteristics, functions, and value.
2. Teachers think carefully about which learning format is best for helping children achieve a desired outcome.
3. Teachers provide experiences, materials, and interactions to enable children to engage in play that allows them to stretch their boundaries to the fullest in their imagination, language, interaction, and self-regulation, as well as practice their newly acquired skills.

DRAFT for Comment

- I. Teachers make classroom experiences accessible for *all* children and responsive to their needs.
 1. Teachers incorporate a wide variety of experiences, materials and equipment, and teaching strategies to accommodate the range of children's individual differences in development, skills and abilities, prior experiences, needs, and interests.
 2. Teachers bring each child's home culture and language into the shared culture of the learning community so that the unique contributions of that home culture and language can be recognized and valued by the other community members, and the child's connection with family and home is supported.
 3. Teachers include all children in all of the classroom activities, and encourage children to be inclusive in their behaviors and interactions with peers.
 4. Teachers are prepared to meet special needs of individual children, including children with disabilities and those who exhibit unusual interests and skills. Teachers use all the strategies identified here, consult with appropriate specialists, and see that the child gets the specialized services he or she needs to succeed in the early childhood setting.

3. Planning curriculum to achieve important outcomes

The curriculum consists of the knowledge and skills children are to gain and the plans for the learning experiences through which those gains will occur. Implementing a curriculum always yields outcomes of some kind—but *which* outcomes those are and *how* a program achieves them are critical. In developmentally appropriate practice, the curriculum helps young children achieve outcomes that are developmentally and educationally significant. The curriculum does this through learning experiences (including play) that reflect what is known about young children in general and about these children in particular, as well as about the sequences in which children learn specific concepts and skills, building on prior knowledge and skills.

Because children learn more in programs where there is a well-planned and implemented curriculum, it is vital for every school and early childhood program to have its curriculum in written form. Teachers use the curriculum and their knowledge of children's interests in planning relevant, engaging learning experiences, and they keep the curriculum in mind in their interactions with children throughout the day. In this way, they ensure that children's learning experiences—in both adult-guided and child-guided contexts—are consistent with the program's goals for children and connected within an organized framework. At the same time, in developmentally appropriate practice

DRAFT for Comment

teachers have flexibility—and the expertise to exercise that flexibility effectively—in how they design and carry out curricular experiences in their classrooms.¹¹⁶ The following describes curriculum planning that is developmentally appropriate for young children:

A. Desired outcomes that are important in young children’s learning and development have been identified and clearly articulated.

1. Teachers consider what children should know and be able to do across the domains of children’s physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development and across the disciplines, including language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, physical education, and health.
2. If state standards or other mandates are in place, teachers become thoroughly familiar with these; teachers add to these any outcomes to which the standards have given inadequate weight.
3. Whatever the source of the goals, teachers and administrators ensure that goals are clearly defined for, communicated to, and understood by all stakeholders, including families.

B. The program has a comprehensive, effective curriculum that targets the identified outcomes.

1. Whether or not teachers were participants in the decision about the curriculum, they familiarize themselves with it and consider its comprehensiveness in addressing all important outcomes.
2. If the program is using published curriculum products, teachers make adaptations to meet the learning needs of the children they teach.
3. If practitioners develop the curriculum themselves, they make certain it targets the identified outcomes and they use strong, up-to-date resources from experts to ensure that curriculum content is robust and comprehensive.

C. Teachers use the curriculum framework in their planning to ensure ample attention is given to important learning goals and to enhance the coherence of the classroom experience.

1. Teachers are familiar with the concepts and skills key for that age group in each domain (physical, social, emotional, cognitive), including how learning and development in one domain impacts that in the other domains.

DRAFT for Comment

2. In their planning, and follow-through, teachers use the curriculum framework along with what they know (from their observation and other assessment) about children's interests, progress, and learning needs. They carefully shape and adapt the experiences they provide children to enable each child to acquire the concepts and skills outlined in the curriculum.
 3. In determining the sequence and pace of learning experiences, teachers consider the developmental paths that children typically follow and the typical sequence in which skills and concepts develop. Teachers use these with an eye to moving all children forward in all areas.
- D.** Teachers make meaningful connections a priority in the learning experiences they provide children, to reflect that all learners, and certainly young children, learn best when the concepts, vocabulary, and skills they encounter are related to something they know and care about, and when the new learnings are themselves interconnected in meaningful, coherent ways.
1. Teachers plan curriculum experiences that integrate children's learning *within* and *across* the domains (physical, social, emotional, cognitive) and the disciplines (including language, literacy, mathematics, social studies, science, art, music, physical education, and health).
 2. Teachers plan curriculum experiences to draw on children's own interests and will introduce children to things likely to interest them, in order to reflect that developing and extending children's interests is particularly important during the preschool years, when children's ability to focus their attention is in its early stages.
 3. Teachers plan curriculum experiences that follow logical sequences and that allow for depth and focus. That is, the experiences do not skim lightly over a great many content areas, but instead allow children to spend sustained time with a more select set.
- E.** Teachers collaborate with those teaching in the preceding and subsequent grade levels, sharing information about children and working to increase the continuity and coherence across ages/grades, while protecting the integrity and appropriateness of practices at each level.
- F.** In the care of infants and toddlers, practitioners plan curriculum (although they may not always call it that). They develop plans for the important routines and experiences that will promote the children's learning and development and enable them to attain desired outcomes.

DRAFT for Comment

4. Assessing children's learning and development

Assessment of children's development and learning is essential for planning, implementing, and evaluating the effectiveness of classroom experiences that teachers and programs are providing. Assessment also is a tool for monitoring children's progress toward a program's desired outcomes. In developmentally appropriate practice, the experiences and the assessments are linked (the experiences are developing what is being assessed, and vice versa); both are aligned with the program's desired outcomes for children.

Sound assessment of young children is challenging because they develop and learn in ways that are characteristically uneven and embedded within the specific cultural and linguistic contexts in which they live. For example, sound assessment takes into consideration such factors as a child's facility in English and stage of linguistic development in the home language. Assessment that is not reliable or valid, or that is used to label, track, or otherwise harm young children, is not developmentally appropriate practice. The following describes sound assessment that is developmentally appropriate for young children:

- A.** Assessment of young children's progress and achievements is ongoing, strategic, and purposeful. The results of assessment are used to inform the planning and implementing of experiences, to communicate with the child's family, and to evaluate and improve teachers' and the program's effectiveness.
- B.** Assessment focuses on children's progress toward goals that are developmentally and educationally significant.
- C.** The program has a system in place that collects, makes sense of, and uses the assessment information. This assessment system is integrated with curriculum planning—that is, teachers continually engage in assessment for the purpose of improving teaching and learning.
- D.** The methods of assessment are appropriate to the developmental status and experiences of young children; and they recognize individual variation in learners and allow children to demonstrate their competence in different ways. Therefore, classroom assessment of young

DRAFT for Comment

children relies heavily on the results of teachers' observations of children, descriptive data, collections of children's work samples, and their performance on authentic activities.

- E. In addition to this assessment by teachers, input from families as well as children's own evaluations of their work are part of the program's overall assessment strategy.
- F. Assessments are tailored to a specific purpose and used only for the purpose for which they have been demonstrated to produce reliable, valid information.
- G. Decisions that have a major impact on children, such as enrollment or placement, are never made on the basis of results from a single developmental assessment or screening instrument/device, but are based on multiple sources of relevant information, particularly observations by teachers and parents.
- H. When a screening or other assessment identifies children who may have special learning or developmental needs, appropriate follow-up, referral, or other intervention is used. Diagnosis or labeling is never the result of a brief screening or one-time assessment. Families should be involved as important sources of information.
- I. Assessment looks not only at what children can and cannot do independently but also at what they can do with assistance from other children or adults. Therefore, teachers assess children as they participate in groups and other situations that are providing scaffolding.

5. Establishing reciprocal relationships with families

Developmentally appropriate practices derive from deep knowledge of child development principles and of the program's children in particular, as well as the context within which each of them is living. The younger the child, the more necessary it is for practitioners to acquire this particular knowledge through relationships with children's families.

Practice cannot be developmentally appropriate if the program/family relationship has a "parent education" orientation (in which staff see themselves as knowing what is best for children and parents as needing to be educated), or if the program limits "parent involvement" to scheduled events, valuable though these may be. Neither can practice be developmentally appropriate if a program's

DRAFT for Comment

“family-centered approach” means families dictate all program content and teachers do whatever families want.

Such approaches do not adequately convey the complexity of the partnership between teachers and families that is a fundamental element of good practice. The following describes the kind of relationships that are developmentally appropriate for young children, in which family members and practitioners work together as members of the learning community.

- A. In reciprocal relationships between practitioners and families, there is mutual respect, cooperation, shared responsibility, and negotiation of conflicts toward achievement of shared goals. (Also see “**Creating a Caring Community of Learners.**”)
- B. Practitioners work in collaborative partnerships with families, establishing and maintaining regular, frequent two-way communication with them.
- C. Family members are welcome in the setting; and there are multiple opportunities for family participation. Families participate in program decisions about their children’s care and education.
- D. Teachers acknowledge a family’s choices and goals for the child and they respond with sensitivity and respect to those preferences and concerns, but without abdicating the responsibility that early childhood practitioners have to support children’s learning and development through developmentally appropriate practices.
- E. Teachers and the family share with each other their knowledge of the particular child and understanding of child development and learning as part of day-to-day communication and in planned conferences. Teachers support families in ways that maximally promote family decision-making capabilities and competence.
- F. Practitioners involve families as a source of information about the child (before program entry and on an ongoing basis) and engage them in the planning for their child.

DRAFT for Comment

- G. The program links families with a range of services, based on identified resources, priorities, and concerns.

Policy Considerations

Note about this draft:

The Policy Considerations section of this position statement is not included in this draft. It will be added at a later date and before the final revision is submitted to the Board for review.

The final, approved NAEYC Position Statement will briefly summarize policies vital in supporting the practices described in the statement. That summary will also provide a link to a fuller description of NAEYC's Public Policy Program and its recommendations in the area of developmentally appropriate practice, which will be regularly updated, and to an array of materials designed for policymakers specifically.

Notes

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Guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice

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