

# Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs

REVISED EDITION

**naeyc**

Sue Bredekamp and Carol Copple, Editors

# **Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

## **in Early Childhood Programs**

**REVISED EDITION**

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***National Association for the Education of Young Children  
Washington, D.C.***

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# Preface

**T**he National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the nation's largest professional organization of early childhood educators, published position statements on developmentally appropriate practice in 1986 and 1987 (Bredekamp 1987). The documents were developed in response to specific, identified needs within a historical context (Bredekamp 1991). The primary purpose of the position statements was to provide guidance to program personnel seeking accreditation by NAEYC's National Academy of Early Childhood Programs. The accreditation criteria call for "developmentally appropriate" activities, materials, and expectations (Bredekamp 1984; NAEYC 1991). A second, more widely applicable purpose for the guidelines was to respond to a growing trend toward more formal, academic instruction of young children—a trend characterized by downward escalation of public school curriculum (Shepard & Smith 1988).

At the time, many early childhood programs were placing undue emphasis on rote learning and whole-group instruction of narrowly defined academic skills at the expense of more active learning approaches based on a broader interpretation of children's educational needs and abilities. Testing, placement, and retention practices also raised serious concerns (NAEYC 1988; Bredekamp & Shepard 1989). As a result of readiness and screening practices that reflected many of the same narrowly defined academic goals that characterized primary-grade curricula, an increasing proportion of children were being identified as unready for kindergarten or first grade and were being assigned to transition classes, retained in grade, or denied enrollment.

These trends were especially evident in kindergartens and primary grades where next-grade expectations were imposed on earlier grades regardless of children's current interests, needs, and competencies. However, concern about appropriate practices also applied across the early childhood age span. Increasing numbers of infants and toddlers were being served in group-care settings where expectations and practices more appropriate for older children were too often imposed on them.

On the basis of these concerns, NAEYC assumed a leadership role in adopting guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice. The primary position was

that programs designed *for* young children be based on what is known *about* young children. The guidelines also reflected a clear commitment regarding the rights of young children to respectful and supportive learning environments and to an education that would prepare them for participation in a free and democratic society.

Since their publication, the guidelines have served an important function for the early childhood field, nationally and internationally. That the guidelines met a need in the profession is clear, given that more than half a million copies of the book's position statement and several million brochures have been distributed. The guidelines' usefulness in contributing to policy and program evaluation decisions is reflected in their adoption by numerous state departments of education in this country (e.g., Maine 1987; California 1988, 1993; Connecticut 1988, 1990; Maryland 1989, 1992; Missouri 1989; Minnesota 1990; Stark County [Ohio] 1991; Nebraska/Iowa 1993; Colorado 1994; Texas 1994), and in several other countries (British Columbia 1990a & b, 1991; Australia 1993; New Zealand 1996). Similarly, other national education organizations took positions on early childhood education that are congruent with NAEYC's statement (e.g., NAEC/SDE 1987; NASBE 1988; IRA 1989; NAESP 1990; SREB 1995).

Like all NAEYC position statements, the documents reflected current understandings, values, and goals at the time of their publication. This knowledge base is derived from reviewing the literature as well as review by many experienced, knowledgeable early childhood educators. As is true in any profession, such bases for decisionmaking are expected to be dynamic and changing in response to new knowledge as well as to benefit from the shared experiences of and interactions among professionals. Given this expectation of change, the Association reviews and revises all position statements periodically to ensure their currency and accuracy; NAEYC anticipates the review process for this document will occur regularly (at least every seven years with a revised document every 10 years).

Perhaps the most important contribution of the 1987 developmentally appropriate practice position statements was that they created an opportunity for increased conversation within and outside our field about our early childhood practice. As a result, the 1987 edition



itself established a new context in which early childhood programs operate. Thus, as numerous programs used the guidelines to improve practices, a great deal was learned that expanded our knowledge. In addition, there was also widespread misinterpretation (and, at times, misrepresentation) of the concept of developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp 1991; Bredekamp & Rosegrant 1992; Kostelnik 1992). Also observed was a trend to co-opt the concept (with commercially prepared curriculum and even tests labeled as "DAP"). Thus, another purpose of the regular revision process is to more clearly address ideas that are easily susceptible to misunderstanding.

The revision process also enables the Association to respond in a thoughtful fashion to critiques that challenge the premises, processes, and effects of the position statement. Thus, the current review process has been even more extensive than the original, including a review of current research and theory, written critiques of the positions (e.g., Bloch 1991; Kessler 1991; Spodek 1991; Swadener & Kessler 1991; McGill-Franzen 1993; Reifel 1993; Mallory & New 1994; Fleeer 1995), and the solicitation of input from NAEYC members through articles in *Young Children* and other journals, as well as through open hearings held throughout the country and during NAEYC annual conferences and at meetings of other professional groups.

Experts serving on NAEYC's Panel on Revisions to Developmentally Appropriate Practice worked for more than two years advising on the proposed revisions to the position statement. NAEYC is very grateful for their significant contributions of wisdom and time to this important project. Panel members were Barbara Bowman, Victoria Fu, Lilian Katz, Rebecca New, Carol Brunson Phillips, Teresa Rosegrant, and Deborah Ziegler; Sue Bredekamp served as staff to the Panel. One goal for the revised position statement is that it will stimulate the kind of serious debate and dialogue that characterized the work of the Panel.

Among the most frequent themes of the Panel's discussions was the need to move beyond the *either/or* polarizing debates in the early childhood field (a trend toward which NAEYC's 1987 document, contrasting appropriate and inappropriate practice, inadvertently contributed) to more *both/and* thinking that better reflects the complexity of the decisions inherent in the work of early childhood education. The revised position statement continues "to take a position" on issues of controversy in the field and also emphasizes that some practices are inappropriate and even harmful to children. Nevertheless, the document acknowledges that there are many ways for practices to be developmentally appropri-

ate, just as there is more than one way to err in decisions about how to support children's development.

As a result of this review and revision process, this updated edition represents NAEYC's current best understanding of theory and research regarding how children learn as well as shared beliefs about what practices are most supportive and respectful of children's healthy development. The guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice described here vary from the 1987 document not only in currency but also in increased attention to issues of appropriate curriculum content and assessment, issues that are addressed more thoroughly in a separate position statement of NAEYC and NAECS/SDE (1992; Bredekamp & Rosegrant 1992, 1995).

This document is intended for use by teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, parents, policymakers, and others involved with programs serving young children, birth through age 8, in schools, centers, and homes. As with so many NAEYC projects, it represents the thoughtful suggestions and careful review of hundreds of early childhood professionals. In addition, the position statement following on pages 3–30 was officially approved by NAEYC's Governing Board in July 1996.

This revised edition builds on the fundamental principles articulated in the previous edition and expands them to better reflect the

1. critical role of the teacher in supporting children's development and learning;
2. concept of classrooms or groups of children as communities of learners in which relationships among adults and groups of children support development and learning;
3. role of culture in the processes of development and learning and the fact that all development and learning occur in and are influenced by sociocultural contexts;
4. significant role of families in early childhood education;
5. applicability of the principles to children with disabilities and other special learning and developmental needs;
6. importance of meaningful and contextually relevant curriculum;
7. necessity of assessment practices that are authentic and meaningful for children and families; and
8. importance of an infrastructure of policy and adequate resources to support delivery of high-quality, developmentally appropriate programs for all children.

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## Overview of the book

NAEYC's revised "Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8" appears as Part 1 of this book. Adopted by the NAEYC Governing Board in July 1996, the position statement defines developmentally appropriate practice as the outcome of a process of teacher decisionmaking that draws on at least three critical, interrelated bodies of knowledge: (1) what teachers know about how children develop and learn; (2) what teachers know about the individual children in their group; and (3) knowledge of the social and cultural context in which those children live and learn. The other parts of this book provide elaboration and examples to help teachers think about applying the principles and guidelines contained in the position statement. Only Part 1 is an official position of the Association.

In Part 2, Sue Bredekamp describes and illustrates the teacher decisionmaking process inherent in developmentally appropriate practice. This section is based on experiences over the last several years, during which time an NAEYC Panel of experts (listed earlier) thoroughly debated the issues and controversies related to the concept of developmentally appropriate practice. Members of the Panel held sessions or open hearings at various meetings throughout the United States and in several other countries, receiving input from thousands of early childhood professionals. The Panel's work was marked by informed and respectful dialogue that included many strong differences of opinion. The process of engaging in serious reflection about early childhood practice, learning from one another, expanding our personal perspectives, and working toward resolution of our disagreements was not only professionally rewarding for all of us but also mirrored the kind of decisionmaking process that early childhood professionals engage in every day. This process is described in more detail in Part 2 in the hope that the publication of NAEYC's revised position statement will encourage other early childhood professionals to engage in serious reflection about their practice.

Making informed decisions about teaching young children requires that teachers have knowledge on which to base their practices. In subsequent parts of this book, we provide more specific descriptions and examples to inform this decisionmaking process for teachers working with children in each of three age groups: infants and toddlers (Part 3); preschoolers and kindergartners, 3- through 5-year-olds (Part 4); and primary-grade children, ages 6 through 8 (Part 5). Each part provides a sketch of characteristics and widely

held expectations of children at this period of the life span, with considerations for practices that are consistent or inconsistent, in our view, with the principles and guidelines of the position statement—that is, that are appropriate or inappropriate.

Subdividing the early childhood age span into parts is always arbitrary because of children's individual differences. In fact, NAEYC believes that all early childhood professionals should be knowledgeable about working with children from birth through age 8 (NAEYC, DEC/CEC, & NBPTS 1996). With many early childhood programs using multiage or family grouping (as is common practice in family child care) and more teachers staying with the same children over several years, the need increases for teachers to understand the full age span.

This revised edition continues to include charts that contrast appropriate and inappropriate practices. The decision to include these charts was not made lightly. Panel members were concerned that in the 1987 edition such charts at times contributed to misunderstanding and oversimplification of the concepts of developmentally appropriate practice. Nevertheless, we also heard from many early childhood professionals that the charts were important tools for education and advocacy. Therefore, we have revised the charts to achieve several goals. We hope to maintain their power to help people understand developmentally appropriate practices by visualizing both positive and negative exemplars of the concepts. We encourage early childhood professionals to use these charts not as prescriptions but to stimulate reflection, debate, and discussion of their practice. We expanded the charts to include more examples of both appropriate and inappropriate practices (practices that are more or less congruent with the principles and guidelines of NAEYC's position statement). And finally, we clearly identify these charts as examples, not official position statements.

The knowledge base informing early childhood practice has greatly increased in the last decade, building on the rich contributions of scholars and practitioners of the past. The challenge for early childhood teachers and teacher educators is to remain lifelong learners in this growing and changing profession—a challenge that, as developmentalists, we embrace.

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—*Sue Bredekamp and Carol Copple, editors*



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# NAEYC Position Statement

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

Adopted July 1996

**T**his statement defines and describes principles of developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs for administrators, teachers, parents, policymakers, and others who make decisions about the care and education of young children. An early childhood program is any group program in a center, school, or other facility that serves children from birth through age 8. Early childhood programs include child care centers, family child care homes, private and public preschools, kindergartens, and primary-grade schools.

The early childhood profession is responsible for establishing and promoting standards of high-quality, professional practice in early childhood programs. These standards must reflect current knowledge and shared beliefs about what constitutes high-quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood education in the context within which services are delivered.

This position paper is organized into several components, which include the following:

1. a description of the current context in which early childhood programs operate;
2. a description of the rationale and need for NAEYC's position statement;
3. a statement of NAEYC's commitment to children;
4. the statement of the position and definition of *developmentally appropriate practice*;
5. a summary of the principles of child development and learning and the theoretical perspectives that inform decisions about early childhood practice;

6. guidelines for making decisions about developmentally appropriate practices that address the following integrated components of early childhood practice: creating a caring community of learners, teaching to enhance children's learning and development, constructing appropriate curriculum, assessing children's learning and development, and establishing reciprocal relationships with families;
7. a challenge to the field to move from *either/or* to *both/and* thinking; and
8. recommendations for policies necessary to ensure developmentally appropriate practices for all children.

This statement is designed to be used in conjunction with NAEYC's "Criteria for High Quality Early Childhood Programs," the standards for accreditation by the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs (NAEYC 1991), and with "Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 through 8" (NAEYC & NAECS/SDE 1992; Bredekamp & Rosegrant 1992, 1995).

### ***The current context of early childhood programs***

The early childhood knowledge base has expanded considerably in recent years, affirming some of the profession's cherished beliefs about good practice and challenging others. In addition to gaining new knowledge, early childhood programs have experienced



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several important changes in recent years. The number of programs continues to increase not only in response to the growing demand for out-of-home child care but also in recognition of the critical importance of educational experiences during the early years (Willer et al. 1991; NCES 1993). For example, in the late 1980s Head Start embarked on the largest expansion in its history, continuing this expansion into the 1990s with significant new services for families with infants and toddlers. The National Education Goals Panel established as an objective of Goal 1 that by the year 2000 all children will have access to high-quality, developmentally appropriate preschool programs (NEGP 1991). Welfare reform portends a greatly increased demand for child care services for even the youngest children from very low-income families.

Some characteristics of early childhood programs have also changed in recent years. Increasingly, programs serve children and families from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, requiring that all programs demonstrate understanding of and responsiveness to cultural and linguistic diversity. Because culture and language are critical components of children's development, practices cannot be developmentally appropriate unless they are responsive to cultural and linguistic diversity.

The Americans with Disabilities Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act now require that all early childhood programs make reasonable accommodations to provide access for children with disabilities or developmental delays (DEC/CEC & NAEYC 1993). This legal right reflects the growing consensus that young children with disabilities are best served in the same community settings where their typically developing peers are found (DEC/CEC 1994).

The trend toward full inclusion of children with disabilities must be reflected in descriptions of recommended practices, and considerable work has been done toward merging the perspectives of early childhood and early childhood special education (Carta et al. 1991; Mallory 1992, 1994; Wolery, Strain, & Bailey 1992; Bredekamp 1993b; DEC Task Force 1993; Mallory & New 1994b; Wolery & Wilbers 1994).

Other important program characteristics include age of children and length of program day. Children are now enrolled in programs at younger ages, many

from infancy. The length of the program day for all ages of children has been extended in response to the need for extended hours of care for employed families. Similarly, program sponsorship has become more diverse. The public schools in the majority of states now provide prekindergarten programs, some for children as young as 3, and many offer before- and after-school child care (Mitchell, Seligson, & Marx 1989; Seppanen, Kaplan deVries, & Seligson 1993; Adams & Sandfort 1994).

Corporate America has become a more visible sponsor of child care programs, with several key corporations leading the way in promoting high quality (for example, IBM, AT&T, and the American Business Collaboration). Family child care homes have become an increasingly visible sector of the child care community, with greater emphasis on professional development and the National Association for Family Child Care taking the lead in establishing an accreditation system for high-quality family child care (Hollestelle 1993; Cohen & Modigliani 1994; Galinsky et al. 1994). Many different settings in this country provide services to young children, and it is legitimate—even beneficial—for these settings to vary in certain ways. However, since it is vital to meet children's learning and developmental needs wherever they are served, high standards of quality should apply to all settings.

The context in which early childhood programs operate today is also characterized by ongoing debates about how best to teach young children and discussions about what sort of practice is most likely to contribute to their development and learning. Perhaps the most important contribution of NAEYC's 1987 position statement on developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp 1987) was that it created an opportunity for increased conversation within and outside the early childhood field about practices. In revising the position statement, NAEYC's goal is not only to improve the quality of current early childhood practice but also to continue to encourage the kind of questioning and debate among early childhood professionals that are necessary for the continued growth of professional knowledge in the field. A related goal is to express NAEYC's position more clearly so that energy is not wasted in unproductive debate about apparent rather than real differences of opinion.



***Educational practices are most effective when they are attuned to the way children develop and learn—that is, when they are developmentally appropriate.***

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## ***Rationale for the position statement***

The increased demand for early childhood education services is partly due to the increased recognition of the crucial importance of experiences during the earliest years of life. Children's experiences during early childhood not only influence their later functioning in school but also can have effects throughout life. For example, current research demonstrates the early and lasting effects of children's environments and experiences on brain development and cognition (Chugani, Phelps, & Mazziotta 1987; Caine & Caine 1991; Kuhl 1994). Studies show that, "From infancy through about age 10, brain cells not only form most of the connections they will maintain throughout life but during this time they retain their greatest malleability" (Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives 1996, 7).

Positive, supportive relationships, important during the earliest years of life, appear essential not only for cognitive development but also for healthy emotional development and social attachment (Bowlby 1969; Stern 1985). The preschool years are an optimum time for development of fundamental motor skills (Gallahue 1993), language development (Dyson & Genishi 1993), and other key foundational aspects of development that have lifelong implications.

Recognition of the importance of the early years has heightened interest and support for early childhood education programs. A number of studies demonstrating long-term, positive consequences of participation in high-quality early childhood programs for children from low-income families influenced the expansion of Head Start and public school pre-kindergarten (Lazar & Darlington 1982; Lee, Brooks-Gunn, & Schuur 1988; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart 1993; Campbell & Ramey 1995). Several decades of research clearly demonstrate that high-quality, developmentally appropriate early childhood programs produce short- and long-term positive effects on children's cognitive and social development (Barnett 1995).

From a thorough review of the research on the long-term effects of early childhood education programs, Barnett concludes that "across all studies, the findings were relatively uniform and constitute overwhelming evidence that early childhood care and education can produce sizeable improvements in school success" (1995, 40). Children from low-income families who participated in high-quality preschool programs were significantly less likely to have been assigned to special education, retained in grade, engaged in crime, or to have dropped out of school. The longitudinal studies, in general, suggest positive consequences for programs that used an approach consistent with principles of developmentally appropriate practice (Lazar & Darlington 1982; Berreuta-Clement et al. 1984; Miller & Bizzell 1984; Schweinhart, Weikart, & Larner 1986; Schweinhart, Barnes, & Weikart 1993; Frede 1995; Schweinhart & Weikart 1996).

Research on the long-term effects of early childhood programs indicates that children who attend good-quality child care programs, even at very young ages, demonstrate positive outcomes, and children who attend poor-quality programs show negative effects (Vandell & Powers 1983; Phillips, McCartney, & Scarr 1987; Fields et al. 1988; Vandell, Henderson, & Wilson 1988; Arnett 1989; Vandell & Corasanti 1990; Burchinal et al. 1996). Specifically, children who experience high-quality, stable child care engage in more complex play, demonstrate more secure attachments to adults and other children, and score higher on measures of thinking ability and language development. High-quality child care can predict academic success, adjustment to school, and reduced behavioral problems for children in first grade (Howes 1988).

While the potential positive effects of high-quality child care are well documented, several large-scale evaluations of child care find that high-quality experiences are not the norm (Whitebook, Howes, & Phillips 1989; Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook 1992; Layzer, Goodson, & Moss 1993; Galinsky et al. 1994; Cost, Quality, & Child Outcomes Study Team 1995). Each of these studies, which included observations

of child care and preschool quality in several states, found that good quality that supports children's health and social and cognitive development is being provided in only about 15% of programs.

Of even greater concern was the large percentage of classrooms and family child care homes that were rated "barely adequate" or "inadequate" for quality. From 12 to 20% of the children were in settings that were considered dangerous to their health and safety and harmful to their social and cognitive development. An alarming number of infants and toddlers (35 to 40%) were found to be in unsafe settings (Cost, Quality, & Child Outcomes Study Team 1995).

Experiences during the earliest years of formal schooling are also formative. Studies demonstrate that children's success or failure during the first years of school often predicts the course of later schooling (Alexander & Entwisle 1988; Slavin, Karweit, & Madden 1989). A growing body of research indicates that more developmentally appropriate teaching in preschool and kindergarten predicts greater success in the early grades (Frede & Barnett 1992; Marcon 1992; Charlesworth et al. 1993).

As with preschool and child care, the observed quality of children's early schooling is uneven (Durkin 1987, 1990; Hiebert & Papierz 1990; Bryant, Clifford, & Peisner 1991; Carnegie Task Force 1996). For instance, in a statewide observational study of kindergarten classrooms, Durkin (1987) found that despite assessment results indicating considerable individual variation in children's literacy skills, which would call for various teaching strategies as well as individual and small-group work, teachers relied on one instructional strategy—whole-group, phonics instruction—and judged children who did not learn well with this one method as unready for first grade. Currently, too many children—especially children from low-income families and some minority groups—experience school failure, are retained in grade, get assigned to special education, and eventually drop out of school (Natriello, McDill, & Pallas 1990; Legters & Slavin 1992).

Results such as these indicate that while early childhood programs have the potential for producing

positive and lasting effects on children, this potential will not be achieved unless more attention is paid to ensuring that all programs meet the highest standards of quality. As the number and type of early childhood programs increase, the need increases for a shared vision and agreed-upon standards of professional practice.

### ***NAEYC's commitment to children***

It is important to acknowledge at the outset the core values that undergird all of NAEYC's work. As stated in NAEYC's *Code of Ethical Conduct*, standards of professional practice in early childhood programs are based on commitment to certain fundamental values that are deeply rooted in the history of the early childhood field:

- appreciating childhood as a unique and valuable stage of the human life cycle [and valuing the quality of children's lives in the present, not just as preparation for the future];
- basing our work with children on knowledge of child development [and learning];
- appreciating and supporting the close ties between the child and family;
- recognizing that children are best understood in the context of family, culture, and society;
- respecting the dignity, worth, and uniqueness of each individual (child, family member, and colleague); and
- helping children and adults achieve their full potential in the context of relationships that are based on trust, respect, and positive regard. (Feeney & Kipnis 1992, 3)

Taken together, these core values define NAEYC's basic commitment to children and underlie its position on developmentally appropriate practice.