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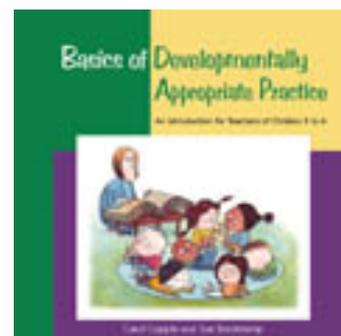
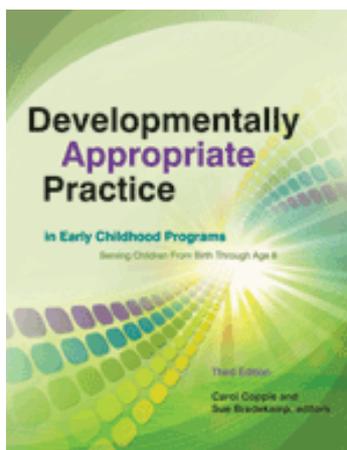
National Association for the Education of Young Children

Developmentally Appropriate Practice and Play

**Online Professional Development Resource
from NAEYC**

Handout

Developmentally
Appropriate
Practice



Includes excerpts from the video and two NAEYC publications: *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* and *Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice*

*As long as the action of the game is of the child's own making he is ready, even anxious, to sample the perils of which this world has such plentiful supply. In the security of the game he makes acquaintance with insecurity; he is able to rationalize absurdities, reconcile himself to not getting his own way, assimilate reality, act heroically without being in danger.**

What Is Play: The Characteristics of Play

- Children enjoy play
- As children play, there is flexibility in their purpose and in how it unfolds
- Children seek out opportunities to play and in it they determine what happens
- There is a non-literal, non-realistic aspect to play

The Importance of Play

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

Children of all ages love to play, and it gives them opportunities to develop physical competence and enjoyment of the outdoors, understand and make sense of their 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.

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 physical, mental, emotional, and social 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.

From such beginnings, children begin to engage in more mature forms of dramatic play, in which by the age of 3–5 they may 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, act in coordination with others, and make plans. High-level dramatic play produces documented cognitive, social, and emotional benefits. 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. 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

* Opie I. & Opie P. (1969) *Children's Games in Street and Playground*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. pp. 3-4.

high-level play. Rather than detracting from academic learning, play appears to support the abilities that underlie such learning and thus to promote school success.

[From Copple, C. and S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 3d ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC. 14–15.]

Consider the critically important role of *play* in young children’s development. Sometimes early childhood advocates make the sweeping assertion that ‘children learn through play.’ There is truth in the statement, but it needs qualification. There are many different kinds of play—constructive play, pretend play, games, rough-and-tumble play—offering different potential benefits for children. For instance, mature dramatic play (e.g., developing a play scenario and staying within its constraints) contributes significantly to children’s self-regulation, while simply manipulating play objects in the dramatic play area (e.g., putting a dish in the play oven, taking it out) does not promote self-regulation skills.

... evidence suggests that higher-level play does not automatically unfold on its own. Teachers have essential roles in ensuring that play meets its potential for children. Thus, to effectively use play to promote children’s development and learning, we must sharpen the lens through which we view play. And as we advocate for play and other practices we think serve children best, it is particularly vital that we be clear in our own thinking and precise in our communication with parents, administrators, and policy makers.

[From Copple, C. and S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 3d ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC. 47–48.]

The Benefits of Play

- The interplay of domains as children play
- The integration of math, literacy, and science
- The development of gross and fine motor skills in physical play
- The expression of emotions in play
- The development of social skills in play
- The development of self-regulation or executive function in sociodramatic play leading to higher achievement

Play and Learning

Young children learn through the following:

Active, hands-on involvement. In and out of the classroom, young children learn best when they are actively involved. As they play, explore, experiment, and interact with people and objects, children are always trying to make sense of those experiences. Though abstract ideas are not totally beyond them, children under age 7 are most comfortable in the concrete world they see, smell, hear, taste, and touch.

Although hands-on learning opportunities suit preschoolers to a tee, equally important is for activities to be “mind-on,” that is, to engage children’s thinking processes and encourage them to investigate, question, and ponder problems.

Meaningful experiences. We all learn best when information and concepts are meaningful to us, that is, connected to what we already know and understand. Although true for people of all ages, this fact about learning is even truer for young children. Children learn best when they

can relate new knowledge to what they have already encountered, to what is already important to them. Then they can weave new threads into the fabric of their previous knowledge and experiences. For example, books about babies or new siblings are likely to be of interest to preschoolers, many of whom have younger sisters, brothers, or cousins. And children can visualize and learn about wolves by thinking about the dogs they've been around.

Constructing their understanding of the world. Young children are mentally active learners who are always "constructing" their knowledge or understanding of the world. That is, they are continually working to figure things out on their own terms. Although this is true of adult learners as well, young children have so much to try to make sense of in the world around them...

As children play, they are actively constructing meaning. For this reason, observing play can be a window into their understandings and concerns.

[From Copple, C. and S. Bredekamp. 2005. *Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice: An Introduction to Teachers of Children 3 to 6*. Washington, DC: NAEYC. 17–18.]

High-Quality Play at Different Ages

Infants and Play

Babies learn through movement...They soon discover that they can change what they see, hear or feel through their own actions—how delightful to kick, see the mobile move, and be able to do it again! ...Babies use their senses and emerging physical skills to learn about the people and objects around them. They touch different textures and put things in their mouths.

Mobile infants thrive on exploration and interaction. Mobility opens new worlds for infants. They can now move to what or whom they want... Freedom to move about safely in an interesting, inviting environment is vital for these busy infants... As they play, these young explorers can be totally absorbed. Opening and shutting, filling and dumping, and picking up and dropping are endlessly fascinating activities that challenge infants' mobility and dexterity as well as their ideas about objects and what they can do... As they play and use their new physical skills, mobile infants learn the rudimentary rules of cause and effect... These infants use and manipulate tools... They also begin to group and compare objects and may enjoy a simple stacking or nesting toy. They demonstrate a basic understanding of *more* and *less*. They work intently at simple problems, like fitting a lid on a pan or picking up a slippery ice cube or a strand of spaghetti...

Mobile infants love to play and interact with caring adults in their lives and can use their new language and motor skills to participate in baby games that are traditional in their culture(s). These games may include versions of peekaboo, hand-clapping rhymes, bouncing games, and games that involve pointing or gesturing. As they learn these routines, babies will come to anticipate the fun parts and will laugh and gesture at the appropriate times.

[From Copple, C. and S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 3d ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC. 55, 60–62.]

Toddlers and Play

As toddlers' verbal skills expand, so does their ability to use objects, to put together a series of actions in play, and to remember events for later reenactment. Adults are especially valued play partners because they can keep the story going as they respond to the child's lead by adding

missing words or by suggesting new steps or new elements. An adult can support a toddler's need to repeat the same story over and over again, encourage her to do more of the storytelling each time, and help her to extend or elaborate on her story. Peers are also highly valued play partners as they heighten the emotional tone of play, take different roles, or share ideas for solving problems.

[From Copple, C. and S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 3d ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC. 67.]

Preschoolers and Play

Although many continue to play alone or in parallel to classmates, preschoolers become increasingly able to enter and remain involved in mature sociodramatic play—that is, able to agree about the topic of play ...to take on more complex roles, and to sustain the play with other children for longer periods of time. Extensive involvement in sociodramatic play not only builds preschoolers' social skills but is also associated with better language and literacy skills, self-regulation, and later school achievement.

Preschoolers cannot become socially competent without many extended times to interact with one another. This requires teachers to plan the preschool day so that there are blocks of time available for children to play and work together... Such periods can include time for pretend (sociodramatic) play, as well as time for projects or other small group activities... In this as in other areas of the program, teacher involvement in and scaffolding of children's social interactions are essential. For example, teachers may help children plan what they will play, what roles they and their friends might take, and how to sustain and extend the play. Teachers may need to help younger, more inhibited, or less skilled preschoolers enter other children's play... In these interactions, teachers can also help children understand and interpret other children's intentions.

Make-believe or pretend play, with guidance and support from adults, blossoms in the preschool years and allows children to make a number of cognitive gains as they try out new ideas and skills. Advances in children's play skills not only serve as indicators of preschoolers' advancing cognitive skills but also are crucial in fostering further cognitive development.

Other types of play, such as drawing or doing puzzles, are important too. But there is something special about social pretend play for preschoolers. When they engage in mature sociodramatic play (pretend play that involves communication with other children), children's interactions last longer than they do in other situations, children show high levels of involvement, large numbers of children are drawn in, and children show more cooperation—all of which have important benefits for children's cognitive (and other types of) development.

[From Copple, C. and S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 3d ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC. 121, 127–128, 131.]

Constructive play with elements of dramatic play is a common combination in children's play. For example: Several children might play for a long time on a Friday and ask to have their work left up over the weekend so they could resume on Monday. Then they would continue their play for an entire hour as well. At times they might pretend to be builders and interested in the ramp and roadway.

Kindergartners and Play

Children are more likely to learn self-regulation and be effective problem solvers if they are given a considerable amount of choice and control over their own activities... Play, particularly complex dramatic or make-believe play, is a crucial vehicle allowing children to develop and practice self-regulation skills. Such play allows children to gain understanding of their emotions, as well as the feelings of others, as they act out situations that induce strong emotions and feelings. It also provides practice in remaining within a prescribed role and play scenario and in establishing, negotiating, and following their own rules—and thus it promotes self-regulation skills more powerfully than adult-directed play.

This is not to say that play should be without guidance and support. In fact, children often require adult modeling and scaffolding to help them learn to engage in sustained, complex play that is most beneficial to their development. However, once opportunity and guidance have been provided, teachers should remove themselves, as children tend to show more complex and beneficial social play in the absence of adults.

Dramatic play experiences are especially advantageous for impulsive children, who are behind their peers in self-regulatory development. To foster self-regulation skills, teachers should make sure children have ample opportunity, materials, and encouragement to engage in play, such as make-believe play and play with made-up rules.

[From Copple, C. and S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 3d ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC. 200.]

The Primary Grades

Whatever they are studying, children at this age learn best through concrete experiences; they need to see connections, and they seek coherence and relevance across domains. When teachers encourage children to build connections across disciplines, they simultaneously foster intellectual growth, social connection, and a joy in learning, making progress deeper and more extensive. An integrated curriculum taps children's interests and senses while enhancing learning across all domains... Integration of curriculum is accomplished in several ways. The teacher may plan a project around a topic of interest to the children that relates to learning goals, addressing them through periods of focused instruction as well as child-selected activity... By participating in cooperative projects and presentations describing what they have learned, children develop social and emotional skills. A focused topic also provides rich opportunities for dramatization, which can enrich language and self-regulation... Whatever the project or activity, when children have the opportunity to study or focus on a specific new concept in some depth and then to apply what they have learned, they make gains in every domain, from language to science to emotional development.

Children of primary grade age now are more capable of playing cooperative, rule-regulated games and sticking to the rules.

The process of becoming self-regulated requires internalizing an understanding of what behaviors are considered acceptable and desirable...a process that occurs gradually over the course of all of early childhood. By age 6, most children, provided with opportunities to learn and practice these skills, have a foundation in being able to manage their thoughts, words, and actions. However, they still need teaching and practice in the area of self-regulation for optimal learning and development... Role-playing and dramatization (especially of stories that include character conflicts or moral dilemmas) can enhance self-regulation and prevent some conflicts... Primary grade teachers who can find ways to stimulate those activities—by providing props and

ideas for characters, for example—enrich children’s skills and learning in self-regulation as well as negotiation, empathy, rule development, and more.

[From Copple, C. and S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 3d ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC. 259, 265, 269.]

Benefits of High-Quality Play

- Longer interactions among children
- High levels of involvement
- More cooperation
- Strengthened ability to picture situations
- Control experiences
- Supports self-regulation

Teachers’ Roles in Play

Research shows that child-guided, teacher-supported play benefits children in many ways. When children play, they engage in many important tasks, such as developing and practicing newly acquired skills, using language, taking turns, making friends, and regulating emotions and behavior according to the demands of the situation. This is why play needs to be a significant part of the young child’s day—and part of a developmentally appropriate classroom. Moreover, effective teachers take action to enhance children’s play and the learning that goes on in the play context. They engage in one-on-one conversations with children; encourage pretend play with themes, roles, rules, and props; or introduce math talk during block building—which research shows is related to language, literacy, mathematics, and social and emotional development.

At the same time, play is not the only thing that children do in developmentally appropriate classrooms. Children also work in small groups, listen to stories, meet as a whole group, work on projects, solve problems, participate in routines that are developmentally enriching, and engage in many other learning experiences.

[From Copple, C. and S. Bredekamp, eds. 2009. *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8*, 3d ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC. 328–329.]

Enabling High-Quality Mature Play

- Provide lengthy play periods
- Provide plenty of realistic props
- Provide unstructured, open-ended materials

Expanding Children’s Play Repertoire

- Observe for children’s interests and abilities
- Read interesting books
- Go on field trips
- Invite class visitors
- Show videos
- Focus on the various roles people play