

# DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE IN GEORGIA

A Position Statement of the  
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*GAYC...Rising to meet Georgia's challenges in early care and education.  
GAYC is the Georgia State Affiliate of the  
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and  
the Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA).*

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## INTRODUCTION

Every day, thousands of Georgia's children attending low quality child care programs are placed at risk. There are almost 724,000 children under the age of five in Georgia, which is about 7.6% of the state's population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Of these children, many are enrolled in a variety of child care and education settings, with 81,136 attending the state lottery funded Georgia Pre-K program (BFTS, 2010). However, according to the recently released Georgia Study of Child Care and Education (Maxwell, et al., 2009), many children receive care in programs considered to be of "low" quality. The study conducted by the Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, found that of the 173 randomly selected programs in the study 35% of preschool classrooms and 67% of infant/toddler classrooms are of "low" quality. This study also indicated that only 5% of preschool and 5% of infant/toddler classrooms were of "high" quality. Georgia Pre-K programs did score slightly higher with over 83% of the randomly selected center-based Pre-K classrooms and 89% of the school-based Pre-K classrooms falling within the "medium" quality category, but only 15% of the center-based Pre-K classrooms and none of the school-based Pre-K classrooms fell within the "high" quality category. These results were based on program assessments using a variety of evaluation tools, and concluded that many programs are not meeting the developmental needs of children in Georgia.

Albert Einstein once said, "*All that is valuable in human society depends upon the opportunity for development accorded the individual.*"

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) ensures that young children receive the finest opportunities for facilitating optimal development. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines developmentally appropriate practice as "a framework of principles and guidelines for best practice in the care and education of young children, birth through age 8. It is grounded both in the research on how young children develop and learn and in what is known about education effectiveness. The principles and guidelines outline practice that promotes young children's *optimal* learning and development" (as cited in <http://www.naeyc.org/DAP>).

Developmentally appropriate practice empowers educators and caregivers to make informed decisions about the care and education of young children, birth through age 8. As NAEYC concretely summarized, "every day,

policy makers, administrators, and teachers/caregivers make a great many decisions, at all levels, both long-term and short-term, that affect young children. It is those many decisions that determine whether what actually happens in a classroom or family child care home is or is not developmentally appropriate” (as cited in <http://www.naeyc.org/DAP>).

## **WHAT IS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE PRACTICE (DAP)?**

Developmentally appropriate practice was first introduced in 1986 by the publication of a NAEYC Position Statement entitled, *Position statement on developmentally appropriate practice in programs for 4- and 5-year-olds*. It was then followed up with a book published by NAEYC in 1987 entitled, *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs serving children from birth through age 8*, edited by Carol Copple and Sue Bredekamp. Since that time, the DAP framework has been recognized and utilized as the best practices guide for early childhood care and education for almost 25 years. In 2009, NAEYC updated both the position statement and the book on DAP with the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of this seminal document.

*Key Messages of the Position Statement*, a companion document to the 2009 DAP Position Statement, succinctly explains the main tenets that comprise developmentally appropriate practice using the following four bulleted points.

- *Developmentally appropriate practice requires both meeting children where they are—which means that teachers must get to know them well—and enabling them to reach goals that are both challenging and achievable.*
- *All teaching practices should be appropriate to children’s age and developmental status, attuned to them as unique individuals, and responsive to the social and cultural contexts in which they live.*
- *Developmentally appropriate practice does not mean making things easier for children. Rather, it means ensuring that goals and experiences are suited to their learning and development and challenging enough to promote their progress and interest.*
- *Best practice is based on knowledge—not on assumptions—of how children learn and develop. The research base yields major principles in human development and learning. Those principles, along with evidence about curriculum and teaching effectiveness, form a solid basis for decision making in early care and education.*

## **CORE COMPONENTS OF DAP**

In order to utilize DAP, one must understand its three core components. These components provide the basis for understanding and employing DAP. These assumptions build upon each other to present a learning environment that is engaging, challenging, fun, and most of all, appropriate for all children in that environment.

1. Knowledge must inform decision making.
2. Goals must be challenging and achievable.
3. Teaching must be intentional to be effective.

Developmentally appropriate practice originates from teachers’ strong knowledge base of how young children grow and learn. This knowledge provides the basis for understanding characteristics of young children and

designing a learning environment that engages all children. This knowledge also permits a teacher to make effective decisions about experiences that will provide for optimal learning and for tailoring curriculum to meet needs of all children.

An effective teacher takes the understanding of who the children are as individuals and where they are developmentally and designs educational experiences that promote further learning and development. Teachers set goals for each child, revising those goals as they gain further information. The goals must be realistic, challenging, and possible for the child to achieve. By choosing goals and challenging children to stretch their abilities in attaining those goals, teachers are guiding children to learn. A learning environment in which children are learning and progressing at their own pace is an environment in which children are not frustrated by unreachable goals or bored by activities they no longer appreciate, and it is a setting in which all children are able to reach their full potential in every area of learning.

As stated on the NAEYC website, “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. Intentional teachers are purposeful and thoughtful about the actions they take, and they direct their teaching toward the goals the program is trying to help children reach” (as cited in from <http://www.naeyc.org/DAP>).

Planning for learning involves great forethought. It requires knowing the children for whom an activity is planned, having knowledge of how to use developmentally appropriate methods to execute the activity, and being prepared to expand upon that activity at a moment’s notice. Intentional teaching goes much further than lesson planning to additionally incorporate interacting with all children, making note of their individual strengths and weaknesses, adapting activities as necessary, determining ways to engage and involve families, and using all that information to determine and meet the needs of each individual child while meeting the needs of the group as a whole as well.

As stated on the NAEYC website, “excellent teachers translate the developmentally appropriate practice framework into high-quality experiences for children through the decisions they make. Such teaching is described in the DAP Position Statement in the form of "Guidelines for Developmentally Appropriate Practice" across 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 Goals
4. Assessing Children's Development and Learning
5. Establishing Reciprocal Relationships with Families

These five aspects of every teacher's work are closely interrelated. Each is a vital part of what teachers and early childhood programs do to achieve key goals for children. None can be left out or shortchanged without seriously weakening the whole” (as cited in <http://www.naeyc.org/DAP>).

## **HOW DAP SUPPORTS QUALITY EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

Developmentally appropriate practice supports quality early care and education because it takes into account the individuality of children and provides guidance for crucial areas needed to facilitate optimal development and educational experiences for children, birth through age 8. By doing so, DAP supports improved quality in early

childhood education in three currently critical areas: 1) reducing the achievement gap, 2) utilizing a comprehensive, effective curriculum, and 3) improving teaching and learning (NAEYC, 2009).

Developmentally appropriate practice and its focus on recognizing and educating children as individuals prompts a call to reduce the achievement gap. When teachers become culturally competent to recognize and educate children as unique individuals that come from families and larger communities with many different learning strengths and weaknesses, the cultural biases that currently widen the achievement gap will narrow (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001). Developmentally appropriate practice requires putting aside cultural biases to find the most effective methods to help each child to learn and develop. Reducing this achievement gap early will help prevent myriad social and learning problems later in a child's life (as cited in Heckman, Grunewald, & Reynolds, 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

The DAP framework provides the guidance needed for implementing a comprehensive curriculum. A comprehensive curriculum can only be effective if it is done in the context of DAP (Kostelnik, Soderman, Whiren & Contributor, 2010; NAEYC 2009). A one size-fits-all curriculum that is only academic and fails to take in learning through play, individual needs, and personal interactions will not be effective (NAEYC, 2009). Developmentally appropriate practice directs teachers in meeting developmental needs of young children while providing opportunities and techniques for adapting a curriculum.

Developmentally appropriate practice improves teaching and learning by helping teachers become better informed in best practices of how to teach. Teachers of young children need to be well prepared. This is a critical time in the lives of children in which an intentional teacher can provide a learning environment that opens avenues of learning to challenge them to reach new goals. Yet none of this can happen without a thorough knowledge of child development in general, DAP specifically, and the children served individually (NAEYC 2009; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

## **RATIONALE FOR POSITION STATEMENT AND AN INVITATION**

The Georgia Association on Young Children (GAYC) has developed this position statement, and invites other organizations to embrace the recommendations contained herein, in an effort to:

- Promote broad based dialogue about the need for quality improvement in Georgia
- Serve as a resource for those seeking information on DAP
- Influence public policy regarding early learning standards in Georgia
- Encourage programs to provide learning environments that will foster better educational and developmental outcomes for Georgia's children
- Increase the number of programs in Georgia utilizing DAP

GAYC's position on DAP is based on empirical research on child development (as cited in Heckman, Grunewald, & Reynolds, 2006; NAEYC, 2009; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004), and how children's brains develop in the first five years of life (Almli, et. al., 2007; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2001). These research studies are clear on the positive effects that quality early childhood education experiences have on the social-emotional development of young children, and the role these experiences play in preparing children for later success in school and life. Conversely, other studies suggest that child care programs that provide substandard care have a detrimental effect on the developing brains of young children (as cited in Heckman, Grunewald, & Reynolds, 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007).

Inadequate relationships and experiences in early childhood can negatively affect brain circuitry and a vast array of developmental outcomes throughout the life span, from academic performance to mental health and interpersonal skills (as cited in Heckman, Grunewald, & Reynolds, 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). It is apparent that there is a relationship between children's early experiences and their overall development. Consequently, GAYC is committed to promoting quality early learning experiences for our youngest children and invites others to step forward to increase the use of DAP in Georgia.

## **GAYC SUPPORTS DAP**

Developmentally appropriate practice is the foundation for all of GAYC's work—quality improvement initiatives, annual conference, publications, professional development and training events, and advocacy and policy efforts. Understanding and implementing DAP is necessary for informed, effective decision making that will facilitate optimal growth and development for all young children.

As an association of early childhood professionals, the mission of the Georgia Association on Young Children is to encourage and support healthy development in young children by working with others (1) to increase public awareness of the importance of early childhood education, and (2) to improve the quality of programs for young children through learning opportunities for early childhood educators. Given this, GAYC is committed to increasing the overall quality of early care and education programs in Georgia. GAYC views DAP as the most essential component in early care and education environments needed to increase quality, and endeavors to:

- Collaborate with NAEYC and others to remain a visible, leading resource in Georgia on DAP
- Assist programs in understanding DAP
- Promote and advocate for the benefits and use of DAP
- Arrange training and educational opportunities on why DAP is important and how to implement DAP

Taking a firm stand and encouraging more programs to use DAP will benefit Georgia's children as they engage in environments that facilitate optimal learning and development.

## **WHAT CAN GEORGIA DO?**

As The Southern Early Childhood Association (SECA) notes, "Everyone concerned with children's development shares the responsibility for quality child care. This responsibility even extends beyond parents, educators, and human service professionals to our policy makers and the leaders in neighborhoods and business communities."

In order to ensure that Georgia's children receive the full benefits of a high quality early education, Georgia needs to look at how best to care for and educate young children, and how to implement standards for best practices in the field. Quality programs focus on practices that are appropriate for the health/safety, social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development of young children. Developmentally appropriate practice provides the standards and framework for planning and applying appropriate learning opportunities for children. Therefore, the systematic application of DAP must be at the heart of any quality improvement initiative.

GAYC proposes the following strategies for early childhood care and education professionals to increase the use of DAP in Georgia:

- Collaborate with other interested parties, such as families, communities, programs, administrators and policy-makers, to increase awareness of the value of DAP in early care and education.
- Work with local, state, and national agencies to utilize DAP-based strategies and outcomes as a means to improve and measure the quality of care in Georgia's child care programs.
- Provide additional training and technical assistance to child care staff and family child care providers on the effectiveness and intentionality of DAP.
- Collaborate with other organizations to develop standards based on DAP to define program quality.
- Advocate for adequate funding and timelines for quality improvement projects and for implementation of quality standards.
- Encourage child care programs to implement voluntary program improvements, such as those related to staff to child ratio and group size, which facilitate the implementation of DAP.

## CONCLUSION

The Georgia Association on Young Children supports efforts to increase the quality of early care and education in Georgia and nationally. Quality early care and education is essential for the future success of Georgia's children. GAYC recognizes DAP as the most critical pathway needed to achieve high quality programs that will enhance and facilitate children's optimal learning and development for success in school and life.

**Position Statement Developers:** GAYC Accreditation and Quality Improvement Committee with significant contributions by Jennifer L. Waters, M.Ed., Chair, Yasmin Evering, Committee Member, and Elizabeth Parr, M.Ed., Committee Member.

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