

3. What is known about the social and cultural contexts in which children live—referring to the values, expectations, and behavioral and linguistic conventions that shape children’s lives at home and in their communities that practitioners must strive to understand in order to ensure that learning experiences in the program or school 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 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 them, how they use language to interact, and how they experience this new world depend on the social and cultural contexts to which they are accustomed. A skilled teacher takes such contextual factors into account, along with the children’s ages and their 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 typically like. This knowledge provides a general idea of the activities, routines,

interactions, and curriculum that will be effective with that group. The teacher also must consider each child, including looking at the child as an individual and within the context of family, community, culture, linguistic norms, 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 children where they are is essential, but no good teacher simply leaves them there. Keeping in mind desired goals and what is known about the children as a group and individually, the teacher plans experiences to promote children’s learning and development.

Learning and development are most likely to occur when new experiences build on what a child already knows and is able to do and when those learning experiences also entail the child stretching a reasonable amount in acquiring new skills, abilities, 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 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. 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.

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 theory and 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 principles rests on a very extensive research base that is only partially referenced here.⁷⁶

All the 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 strengths and needs of individual children, with all their variations in prior experiences, abilities and talents, home language and English proficiency, personalities and temperaments, and community and cultural backgrounds.

1 All the domains of development and learning—physical, social and 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.⁷⁷ Because this full spectrum of development and learning is fundamental to children’s lives and to their future participation as members of society, early care and education must address all the domains.

Further, changes in one domain often facilitate or limit development in other areas.⁷⁸ For example, when children 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.⁷⁹ A growing body of work demonstrates the relationship between emotional and social factors and children’s academic competence⁸⁰ 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 interrelated-

ness 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.⁸¹ 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 and linguistic contexts.⁸² 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 gain specific concepts, skills, and abilities, building on prior development and learning. In mathematics, for example, children’s learning to count serves as an important foundation for their acquiring an understanding of numerals.⁸³ 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.

Individual variation has at least two dimensions: the inevitable variability around the typical or normative course of development and the uniqueness of each child as an individual. Children’s development follows individual patterns and timing; children also vary in temperament, personality, and aptitudes, as well as in what they learn in their family and within the social and cultural context or contexts that shape their experience.

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 their

development and learning. The same is true when children's prior experiences do not give them the knowledge and skills they need to thrive in a specific learning environment.

Given this normal range of variation, decisions about curriculum, teaching, and interactions with children 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 is 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.⁸⁴ 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. Conversely, the impact of an organic condition on a young child's learning and development can be minimized through systematic, individualized intervention. Likewise, a child's innate 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, 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.

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 or her 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.⁸⁵ Similarly, early stimulation promotes brain development and the forming of neural connections, which in turn enable further development and learning. But if the very young child does not get this stimulation, he is less able to benefit from subsequent learning opportunities, and a cumulative disadvantage is set in motion.

Intervention and support are more successful the earlier a problem is addressed. Prevention of reading difficulties, for example, is far less difficult and expensive than remediation.⁸⁶ In addition, the literature 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.⁸⁷ Ensuring that children get the needed environmental inputs and supports for a particular kind of learning and development at its "prime time" is always the most reliable route to desired results.

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.⁸⁸ The younger the child, the more she or he tends to think concretely and in the here and now. Yet in some ways, young children's thinking can be quite abstract. For example, preschoolers know that adding always makes *more* and subtracting makes *less*, and they are able to grasp abstract ideas about counting objects such as the one-to-one principle.⁸⁹

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.⁹⁰ In the preschool years, teachers can help children develop self-regulation by scaffolding high-level dramatic play,⁹¹ helping children learn to express their emotions, and engaging children in planning and decision making.⁹²

During the early years of life, children move from sensory or behavioral responses to symbolic or representational knowledge.⁹³ For example, young children are able to navigate their homes and other familiar settings by recall and sensory cues, but later they come to understand and can use abstractions such as *left* and *right* or read a map of the house. It is around age 2 that children begin to represent and reconstruct their experiences and knowledge.⁹⁴ For example, children may use one object to stand for another in play, such as a block for a phone or a spatula for a guitar.⁹⁵ Their ability to use various modes and media to convey their meaning increases in range and scope. By the preschool years, these modes may include oral language, gestures and body movement, visual arts (drawing, painting, sculpting), construction, dramatic play, and writing. Their efforts to represent their ideas and concepts in any of these modes enhance the knowledge itself.⁹⁶

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.⁹⁷

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.⁹⁸ The first and most important relationships are those a 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.⁹⁹ 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.¹⁰⁰

Nurturing relationships are vital in fostering 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 confidence to try new experiences and attempt new skills, such relationships support children's learning and the acquisition of numerous capabilities.¹⁰¹

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.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³ Early childhood teachers need to understand the influence of sociocultural contexts and family circumstances on learning, recognize children's developing competencies, and be familiar with the variety of ways that children may demonstrate their developmental achievements.¹⁰⁴ 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 in 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 social or cultural 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. Acquiring a new language or the ability to operate in a new culture can and should be an additive process, rather than causing the displacement of the child's first language and culture.¹⁰⁵ For example, immigrant children are able to develop English proficiency without having to give up their home language, and it is important that they retain their fluency in the language of their family and community. Likewise, children who speak only English benefit from learning another language and can do so without sacrificing their English proficiency.¹⁰⁶

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 cognitive development from the constructivist, interactive perspective.¹⁰⁷ That is, young children construct their knowledge and understanding of the world in the course of their own experiences, as well as from teachers, family members, peers and older children, and from books and other media. They learn from the concrete (e.g., manipulatives); they also apparently are capable of and interested in abstract ideas, to a far greater degree than was previously believed.¹⁰⁸ Children take all this input 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 better transfer and apply their learning in new contexts.¹⁰⁹

Using multiple teaching strategies is important in meeting children's different learning needs. The *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers* report 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.¹¹⁰

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, including children who may need much more support than others even in exploration and play.¹¹¹

10 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.¹¹²

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.¹¹³

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.¹¹⁴ High-level dramatic play produces documented cognitive, social, and emotional benefits.¹¹⁵ 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.¹¹⁶ 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.¹¹⁷ Rather than detracting from academic learning, play appears to support the abilities that underlie such learning and thus to promote school success.¹¹⁸

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.¹¹⁹ 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.¹²⁰

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 succeed at that task. Once children make this stretch to a new level in a supportive context, they can 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*,¹²¹ is a key feature of effective teaching.¹²²

At the same time, children need to be successful in new tasks a significant proportion of the time in order for their motivation and persistence to be

maintained.¹²³ 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 during play and in other child-guided contexts.¹²⁴

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 general knowledge, along with what the teacher learns from close observation and probing of the individual child's thinking, is critical to matching curriculum and teaching experiences to that child's emerging competencies so as to be challenging but not frustrating.

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.¹²⁵ Focused on the *how* rather than the *what* of learning, approaches to learning involve both children's feelings about learning (including their interest, pleasure, and motivation to learn) and children's behavior when learning (including attention, persistence, flexibility, and self-regulation).¹²⁶

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.¹²⁷ Children with more positive learning behaviors, such as initiative, attention, and persistence, later develop stronger language skills.¹²⁸ Moreover, children with greater self-regulation and other "learning-related skills" in kindergarten are more skilled in reading and mathematics in later grades.¹²⁹

Although temperament and other inherent differences may affect children's approaches to learn-

ing, 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

strategies include strengthening relationships with children; working with families; and selecting effective curriculum, assessments, and teaching methods.¹³⁰

Guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice

Practice that promotes young children’s optimal learning and development—what this statement terms *developmentally appropriate practice*—is grounded both in the research on child development and learning and in the knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness in early care and education.

But whether or not what actually happens in the classroom is, in practice, developmentally appropriate is the result of myriad decisions at all levels—by policy makers, 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, 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 development and learning, (3) planning curriculum to achieve important goals, (4) assessing children’s development and learning, and (5) establishing reciprocal relationships with families.

1 Creating a caring community of learners

Because early childhood settings tend to be children’s first communities outside the home, the character of these communities is very influential in development. How children expect to be treated and how they treat others is significantly shaped in the early childhood setting. 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, emotional, and cognitive environment conducive to that development and 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 members of the learning community to consider and contribute to one another’s well-being and learning.

To create a caring community of learners, practitioners ensure that the following occur for children from birth through the primary grades.

- 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. Each child has unique strengths, interests, and perspectives to contribute. Children learn to respect and acknowledge differences of all kinds and to value each person.
- B.** Relationships are an important context through which children develop and learn. Children construct their understandings about the world around them through interactions with other members of the community (both adults and peers). Opportunities to play together, collaborate on investigations and projects, and talk with peers and adults enhance children’s development and learning. Interacting in small groups provides a context for children to extend their thinking, build on one another’s ideas, and cooperate to solve problems. (Also see guideline 5, “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