

Developmentally Appropriate Instruction for Early Childhood

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The concept of developmentally appropriate practices refers to providing an environment and offering content, materials, activities, and approaches that are coordinated with a child's level of development and readiness. Three dimensions of appropriateness must be considered: age appropriateness, individual appropriateness, and appropriateness for the cultural and social context of the child (Early Childhood Network, 1997).

In Sandra Crosser's 1996 report of The Butterfly Garden, she writes that school staff needs a clearer understanding of developmentally appropriate practice. Many schools' programs claim to be "developmentally" yet they rate low on some of the key classroom activities that early childhood educators define as developmental. Crosser also writes that research on children's learning suggests the importance of developmentally appropriate practice.

Crosser (1996) suggests that it would be wise to step back and look at what we are doing in our preschool classrooms. We probably need to reassess how well we are matching what we expect of children with what is developmentally appropriate practice.

Crosser goes on to say that in a developmentally appropriate classroom, the teacher is seldom center stage. The children are the actors. The teacher is coaching, observing, asking questions, providing security and comfort when needed. The teachers challenge children to comprehend at deeper levels by the type of questions they ask.. She says that an age-appropriate schedule for preschoolers is built around large blocks of time during which the children move freely about the classroom and self-selecting activities.

George S Morrison, in his 1991 book Early Childhood Education Today, writes that many public schools systems have adapted and modified Maria Montessori's techniques in their kindergarten and first grade programs. One of Montessori's principles, as stated by Morrison,

would be the respect for the child. Education should be individualized for each child because each child is unique. The educator must respect while he/she observes with human interest, the development of the child's life. Children are not miniature adults and should not be treated as if they were. According to Morrison, Montessori believed that a child must be recognized as separate and distinct from that of an adult. Educators can show respect for children by letting them do things for themselves. An example would be to encourage and promote independence. Children are able to develop the skills and abilities necessary for effective learning and for positive self-esteem when they have choices.

Another one of Montessori's principles is that no child is educated by another person (Morrison, 1991). She feels that one must educate oneself. It may be said that we acquire knowledge by using our minds, but the child absorbs knowledge directly into his psychic life. Montessori says that "simply by continuing to live, the child learns to speak his native tongue" (cited Morrison, 1991, pg 83). Morrison goes on to say that Montessori also believed that there were sensitive periods. This is when children were more susceptible to certain behaviors and could learn specific skills more easily. The role of the teacher to detect times of sensitivity for learning and provide the setting for optimum fulfillment. Observation then becomes crucial.

Another one of Montessori's beliefs, according to Morrison (1991), was that the child learns best in a prepared environment. The purpose of this prepared environment is to make the child independent of the adult. This is a place where the child can do things for himself. An essential characteristic of this type of classroom is freedom. The child, however, is not free to make unlimited choices. The child must know how to use materials correctly before he is free to choose materials.

The concept in which children are capable of educating themselves is called auto-education. According to Morrison, Montessori feels everyone learns a great deal through one's own efforts. She says that the art of teaching includes preparing the environment so that children educate themselves by participating in it.

Morrison goes on to say that Montessori feels the teacher must have certain qualities to implement the principles. One quality should be making the children the center of learning. Encouraging children to use the freedom provided for them is the second quality. The third quality would be to observe children to prepare the best possible environment, recognizing sensitive periods, and diverting unacceptable behavior to meaningful tasks.

Morrison (1980) also writes in his book, *Early Childhood Education Today*, that it is important to have some knowledge of commonly used definitions. He says educators themselves are not always clear about terms they use in their work. Early childhood refers to the child from conception to age eight. Sometimes this term is used to refer to children who have not yet reached school age. Early childhood education refers to any program designed for children in this age group, according to Morrison.

Programs designed for children prior to entering first grade emphasize social and emotional development in an ordered framework of free play and large group activities (Morrison, 1980). Reading, writing, and number computation are generally reserved for first grade. The main emphasis is placed on activities that promote socialization. According to Morrison, group activities which involve playing with materials and classmates are considered of utmost importance. The concept of socialization in which children have opportunities to play with other children, learn to share, play attention to the teacher, follow directions, and become

adjusted to schooling is generally congruent with the public's view of the purpose of preschool programs.

According to Morrison, parents and teachers believe that play is good for children and facilities should be provided for it. The question has been raised by critics of whether or not any meaningful learning occurs from such playful activity. Morrison writes that people favor structuring, extending, and utilizing play for the purpose of developing concepts at both the cognitive and affective levels. Morrison goes on to say that early childhood educators view play as that which children engage in after they have completed other teacher activities. Some teacher activities such as games and puzzles can also be called play. However, in a cognitive setting they are not because the teacher selected the activities to teach a specific concept (Morrison, 1980).

According to Bernard Spodek (1972), early childhood education, in the United States, is practiced in nursery schools, day-care centers, Head-Start programs, kindergartens, and primary classes. There are common elements as well as differences among these institutions. The age of the children, traditions, goals set for programs, and psychological theories are a few differences in institutional settings.

In the book written by Copple, Sigel, and Saunders (1984), several guidelines for verbal interactions are given. The first one is to initiate interactions, but do it gently and time them carefully. The teacher needs to make his/her contributions relevant to what the child is already doing, even when the questions are intended to open up a new direction. The timing of initiating interactions is important, too. An example is when a child had just made a new discovery; it is not time to ask him why it works. After he has replicated his discovery several times, he will be more receptive to a teacher's question or comment.

Another guideline, according to these three authors, would be to ask questions rather than giving statements. An important thing to remember is to make sure the teacher's questions are real questions and not statements in question form.

The authors go on to give a third guideline which is to answer questions when asked, but avoid pedantic replies or doing the child's thinking for him. If the question can be answered by manipulation of materials or by further guided thinking about the problem, respond to the question with another question or suggestion to encourage the child to find his or her own answer.

The fourth guideline is to ask questions simply. The authors suggest that the teacher use words and sentence structures that children already understand unless they are trying to find out about children's understanding of language. As the teacher talks with the children and observes them, they will discover what vocabulary they do and do not understand and where they have trouble because of the complexity of the linguistic structure.

Another guideline, according to Copple, Saunders, and Sigel (1984), is to allow children time to answer questions. The teacher needs to wait patiently and expectantly for their answers. The children need time to process the teacher's request. Rephrasing a question before the amount of time has elapsed can interfere with children's understanding and formulation of their own answers. The teacher needs to ask only one question at a time.

A sixth guideline is that a teacher should ask questions for which they really want to know the child's answer. Children can often sense when teachers are not really interested in their answer (Copple, Saunders,, Sigel, 1984).

The seventh and final guideline, according to these authors, is to follow up on initial questions in ways that help the child provide adequate answers. The following are techniques the authors found helpful in getting good answers:

1. Vary the use of open-ended questions and those that ask for specific information.
2. It may be helpful to ask questions that are tangential to the main question you are pursuing.
3. Bring the discussion back to the initial focus after pursuing tangential lines of inquiry.
4. Occasionally contribute some suggestions for the children's reaction.
5. Be honest about the lack of knowledge, whether it is of the child's meaning or of the subject matter itself. (pp.215-217)

Children need appropriate environments if they are to thrive (Crosser, 1996). Each day, the teacher faces the challenge to create the perfect developmentally appropriate environment for every young child. The teacher will most likely fall short from time to time because she is also growing and learning. She needs to take the time to reflect on her practice and to reassess what she is going in light of what she dares to share.

References:

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