

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

What is developmentally appropriate? How do we accomplish it? Can you build a developmentally appropriate program and meet the goals set by parents and administrators for what they believe children should be learning? In 1996 and again in 2009, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) revised their position statement on developmentally appropriate practice to reflect change and reinforce a commitment to excellence in educating children. In general, these goals state that as adults, children will need the ability to:

- communicate well, respect others, accept diversity, and function well as members of a team;
- analyze situations, make reasoned judgements, and solve new problems as they emerge;
- access information through various modes, including spoken and written language, and intelligently employ complex tools and technologies as they are developed; and
- continue to learn new approaches, skills, and knowledge as conditions and needs change.

NAEYC also states that programs allow children to develop curiosity and confidence in themselves as learners through child-centered and initiated, teacher-supported play experiences. Quality play and learning experiences for children do not just happen. Teachers need to plan so that children are provided with physical environments and materials which stimulate creativity and foster exploration and curiosity. Please see www.NAEYC.org for more information.

The most constructive play experiences occur when children are allowed to choose their own activities and play at their own pace, without being hurried. Schedules should have significant blocks of time to allow children to play in the centers of their choice. Teachers should be available to interact with the children, to ask questions to provoke thought, and to provide materials to support play.

The FunShine Express® curriculums are designed to take into account how children learn and develop. However, it is up to teachers to ensure that the manner in which the material is presented is developmentally appropriate for the children in their group. This means individualizing the lesson plans. By implementing the following strategies, early childhood professionals can better foster enthusiasm for learning, build readiness skills, and ensure that the activities they are offering to the children are developmentally appropriate.

Remember to:

- Adjust when and how topics and basic skills are being introduced based on the children's interests and abilities. If the children require more time with a topic than we have scheduled, it's important that you allow for that. Move on when the children have grasped the concept or when interest begins to wane. Look for extended activity ideas or accommodations in the curriculum to help you adjust your schedule and activities.
- Incorporate children's cultures and the community into the curriculum. Utilize the families of the children in your care as resources. Add the specific food, music, language, traditions of your families to the activities in the curriculum. Be aware of local and regional uniqueness-what is special about where you live? Add those events, celebrations and opportunities to the topics and themes in the curriculum. Employers, community organizations, area colleges and local businesses can be a great connection to your program. Share the topic of the curriculum with them and brain storm ideas of how they can play a part in your week.
- Include all children by adapting activities for different ages and abilities. We offer numerous suggestions! Children learn and grow at different speeds, sometimes slowly and other times in leaps and bounds. Some children need more repetition, others need more challenges. Look for our ideas to help you provide the best program for the children in your care.

Theories and Research

While the members of the Curriculum Design and Development Committee at FunShine Express® originate from a wide range of backgrounds, we all work together to create a curriculum that is aligned with our interpretation of classic child development and learning theories that have been widely accepted by the field of early childhood.

Before Learning Is Possible - Maslow

The work of Abraham Maslow describes specific needs of all people. He organized these needs into a hierarchy usually depicted as a pyramid showing how our needs are layered and build upon each other. He pointed out that children must have their basic needs met before growth and learning are possible. Children need to have adequate food, clothing, shelter, sleep, feel safe, and be connected to another human being in order to learn.

You, the teacher, make sure the necessary physical needs are met and we provide the plan of activities and opportunities for you to help children continue to grow and learn.

Piaget and Cognitive Development

Jean Piaget identified four stages of cognitive development. The Buttercups® Curriculum is geared to children ages 6 months to 36 months. This age group is reflected in Piaget's first stage Sensorimotor. The Fireflies® Curriculum, for 3-5 year olds, plans for children moving out of the Sensorimotor stage into the Preoperational Thought stage of development. Children in these two stages of development are still receiving information through their senses and by physical movement around their environment. As they move into Preoperational Thought, they can remember things and activities they have seen and done. However, they do not have the speech and language to always express it or express their thoughts with the correct sounds, words or word tenses. They need to manipulate objects and at best learn through actions on or about themselves, then in abstract two-dimensional (paper) examples. This is a rich, foundational time period for learning basic concepts, vocabulary, becoming independent in some self-help skills, and communicating in general. Our curriculums provide opportunities for children to connect with materials and ideas. Our activities allow the teacher to help children understand, practice, and enjoy learning through new experiences.

Children may have similar birthdates, but may not be necessarily at the same level of development. Throughout the Curriculum Guide, providers will find that many activities offer suggestions for adjusting the level of difficulty to meet each child at their stage of cognition. It is important to remember that there will always be a range of understanding and an opportunity to extend learning. In addition, lengths of free play provide opportunities for children to explore learning centers and practice newly introduced concepts. Activities may be repeated or become part of your centers or general environment to allow children to be successful and transfer new skills or ideas into everyday practice.

An important principle of Piaget's findings is that children need hands-on experience with their environment in order to form concepts of the world and how it works. Providers are encouraged to acknowledge children's ideas and support them nonjudgementally, so as not to stifle the natural way in which children learn and think. Infants begin by receiving information through reflexive movements. As they begin to be able to control their head, arms, legs, and finger movements they become more intentional about what they touch, hear, see, and taste. At about one year they begin to realize things don't disappear just because they are out of sight. As this skill increases and refines (at about 18 months) children can search for something that is hidden out of sight. After 18 months, they begin remembering things, events, and put these experiences into groups or categories. At this age we see children using objects in play to represent other things and getting involved in dramatic play. And of course, the explosion of vocabulary begins!

Our curriculums include opportunities to expand vocabulary, present concepts in playful games and activities, and encourage the individuality and creativity of each child. Through many experiences that are related to themes, the curriculums build and expand on the skill level of the children in your care. Activities in the curriculum include games of memory, classification, physical, natural and earth science, measurement, one-to one

correspondence, and problem solving. Visual-spatial skills, estimation, observing, comparing and predicting are all processes that are promoted. Teachers are encouraged to extend activities, repeat them, and help children transfer these skills from your programs to home.

Vygotsky and Learning Potential

Lev Vygotsky taught the early childhood community that children's potential for learning is maximized through interacting with peers and adults. That is, they can learn more by interacting with others than they can alone. The curriculums offer open-ended questions and suggested dialogue to encourage children's thinking and social interaction. Our curriculums provide many opportunities for children to think about why? How? What if? And, what might come next? The teacher is a model to children for prediction and problem solving. The schedule, activities, and materials included allow the teacher to help children make the connections from experiences to understanding concepts. There are activities that are teacher directed/led, others that children can interact with other children, and then opportunities for children to choose the activity in extended play. The teacher is encouraged to be a leader, an observer, and a participant in activities with children.

Vygotsky encouraged adults to understand that children have a zone (Zone of Proximal Development) - a range of development that is an ever changing target. With each new skill or concept there is a progression of not understanding, being made aware of, practice, and then accomplishment. Our curriculums advocate that the adult must allow for all these levels of learning with multiple children of multiple age ranges. The curriculums strive for the use of many open-ended materials that can help bring about the greatest variety of opportunities for the children in your care. Activities are designed to allow the teacher/caregiver to be intentional about what connection is being made, i.e. the concept, vocabulary, or process. The adult (caregiver/teacher/parent) is directed to guide the child through a process that will help the child be successful and learn what he/she could not have understood on his/her own.

Erikson's Stages of Development

Erik Erikson developed an approach to psychosocial development which divided the area into eight stages that span from infancy to adulthood. He identified an important event that must be conquered in each stage before progression to the next stage could occur. Birth to two year olds move through a stage of Trust vs. Mistrust. The most important element to offer during this time is consistency. Children must feel safe. Undue stress compromises learning and moving forward with social/emotional development. Adults must provide a routine that allows young children to be able to rely on the fact that someone will tend to their needs and be available to interact with them.

Two to four year olds are typically involved with Autonomy vs. Shame or Doubt. This is when independence begins though physical movement around the environment and exploring continues through the senses. Children want to be able to do things for themselves, but often lack the skill to complete the task. Familiar examples are dressing, toileting, pouring, and other self - help skills. If children fail to gain confidence, they doubt their abilities. Opportunities for practicing skills with gentle guidance and positive reinforcement by adults are key. As children feel they have some self - control they will move forward to the next stage.

Four to seven year olds are represented by the stage of Initiative vs. Guilt. This is when children construct their own ideas, and want to make decisions. They want to please the adults in their environments at home, childcare, and community situations. Teachers/caregivers/parents should encourage children's creativity and problem solving. Adults need to constantly supply vocabulary, opportunities for reasoning, practice of skills, and gently accept and guide children's efforts.

Our curriculums offer guidance for providers to support children's needs in each stage. Children are also challenged to do as much as they are able to by themselves (with minimal assistance). With support and encouragement, children can very often do more than they thought they could. Such an atmosphere helps children learn independence and feel confident and in control.

Brain Development and Current Research

We know from extensive brain research in the last ten years that our first years are the most important years for brain development. Through new technology of brain imaging researchers have proven that experience builds brain pathways and connections. Children need to interact with real objects to build memory. They need repeated experiences to build successful skill levels. Children, even young infants, need to be given problem solving opportunities to use their cognitive skills.

Children need time, too, for involvement, to create their own ideas, explore, and get deeply involved in play. Children learn more when they are not stressed or not overly stimulated. Stimulation can occur via light, sound, smell, activity, etc. The curriculums include many hands-on activities. They promote using additional materials from your specific location that speak to all the senses and encourage taking time to enjoy each stage of development of each child. The individual topics and themes bring new experiences and target age appropriate concepts.

An Ongoing Process

We have produced high quality curriculum products since 1995. The members of the Curriculum Design and Development Committee at FunShine Express® are careful to maintain our education and training in order to provide the most up-to-date and appropriate material each month that align with evidence - based best practices. We attend regional and national conferences, participate in local trainings, and do continual reading and research to learn about new trends and research related to how children learn and grow. Although many of our themes follow a three year rotation, each monthly program is rewritten and reworked to allow for updates and changes made necessary by national trends and new research.