Developmentally Appropriate Child Care and Education for Young Children

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An important dimension of high-quality care is that **care is given to children in a way that is *developmentally appropriate***. Children are each unique. Each child needs care and education that will take into account his or her individual needs and abilities. Care and education that is developmentally appropriate responds to the age, developmental level and uniqueness of a child.

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An Introduction to Developmentally Appropriate Care and Education

The phrase *developmentally appropriate care* has become a common focus in early childhood care and education. Recognition of the importance of a child's early years has increased significantly, and along with it an awareness of the need for a healthy care environment for children that nurtures development and growth. Several reasons explain why this emphasis on developmentally appropriate care is important:

- Healthy development in the early years is the foundation on which a child's future well-being and success is built.

- A child's healthy development in the physical, cognitive (mental), social, emotional and language areas depends on care and education that is positive and nurturing.

- Young children vary widely in their specific developmental and individual needs or conditions. Young children develop at different rates and often need support or guidance that is responsive to their specific concerns or learning styles (ability to speak clearly, motor skills such as walking, management of emotions, etc.).

- Parents and other adult caregivers benefit from a sound and accurate understanding of what children are generally capable of doing or not doing based on their age and developmental abilities.

- A large percentage of "parental concerns" or "child behavior problems," such as a child saying "No!" or dumping toys, are in reality issues of normal development. Thus, knowledge of how children develop can help adults understand appropriate expectations for young children. Adults need to base their expectations for children's attitudes or behavior on an understanding of what is developmentally common and appropriate.

Children benefit when the adults around them provide a care environment that reflects an understanding of child development and developmentally appropriate practices.

Developmentally appropriate care and education essentially refers to care or education that meets the child's individual needs at a particular age or developmental level. Developmentally appropriate care takes all areas of development into account, including the physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of a child. The emphasis is not on a specific way to care for children but is instead based on understanding and respecting principles of how a child develops through time. Also, it emphasizes types of care and education practices that are appropriate at various stages of development. Developmentally appropriate care guidelines help parents, care providers and teachers understand a child's developmental needs and provide care that supports children in growing toward their full potential. Such guidelines have been outlined in the early childhood care and education community.

Some key aspects of developmentally appropriate care are embodied in the following points:

- *Age appropriateness* and *individual appropriateness* are important criteria to evaluate care.

- *Age appropriateness* refers to the universal, predictable sequences of growth and change that occur in children typically during the early years of life. For example, physically, children hold up their head, roll over, progress to sitting and then eventually reach standing and walking. Age appropriateness is extremely important for early detection of developmental delays, but each child develops at his or her own rate.

- *Individual appropriateness* refers to the uniqueness of each child growing at his or her own pattern and timing, as well as individual personality, learning style, culture and family background experiences.

Parents, caregivers, teachers and others are more able to give nurturing care and education when they are trained to pay attention to both of these factors when planning care for children. As long as children fall within the normal range of developmental abilities, caregiving and education efforts should encourage children to grow and develop in a manner that helps them reach goals that are both challenging and achievable.

Key Features of Developmentally Appropriate Care and Education

A set of key features that characterize developmentally appropriate care for young children includes the following items. Care providers and teachers:

- Act in a patient, supportive and encouraging manner with children

- Foster creativity, exploration and imagination

- Help children find and select interests and activities important to them

- Are sensitive to the individual developmental abilities of children

- Interact with children by listening to them, responding and talking about things of interest to them

- Enable children to build esteem by doing things on their own or for themselves

- Provide choices to children in doing activities, using materials or making decisions

- Establish and follow clear and reasonable limits

- Use a variety of approaches to care for and meet each child's individual needs and foster children's abilities

Developmentally Appropriate Practices in Care and Education Settings

As parents and other adults examine child care options, they can benefit from observing and being aware of developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) used in child-care settings. The following tables provide selective examples, which are not exhaustive, of developmentally appropriate practices at different ages that adults might watch for in care settings.

Developmentally Appropriate Care Practices

Infants – 0 to 12 months (first year)
Parents, caregivers and teachers should:

Physical	• Provide face-to-face interactions with adults so infants can see, hear and feel others. • Furnish child-safe toys and materials that encourage physical exploration and movement. • Allow infants to see, mouth and grab soft objects to experience tactile stimulation.
Cognitive	• Point out objects or share items to look at, touch or hear. • Share back-and-forth interactions such as peek-a-boo, patty cake (hand games) or finger plays.
Emotional	• Meet basic physical needs for feeding, changing and comfort with consistency and gentleness. • Respond promptly to infant cues for help or distress.
Social	• Furnish consistent, caring and gentle interactions with adults. • Hold, talk, sing and play with infants regularly.
Environment/Space	• Put infants in spaces that let them move, reach, touch, roll over and otherwise use physical abilities. • Provide helpful toys and equipment, which may include cribs, play yards, colorful pictures or vinyl/cardboard books, mobiles, rattles, soft balls, etc.

Infants/Toddlers – 12 to 24 months (age 1)
Parents, caregivers and teachers should:

Physical	• Give support to learning large motor skills such as crawling, standing, throwing and walking. • Provide a variety of child-safe toys and materials to handle and use in play.
Cognitive	• Allow many opportunities for children to explore for themselves and play without interruption. • Describe what a child is doing and repeat words together for building vocabulary.

Emotional	• Engage in one-on-one, face-to-face exchanges through games, singing and playing.
	• Furnish comfort and reassurance when the child feels scared, hurt or lonely.
Social	• Give children individual toys to play with and understand sharing is not yet to be expected.
	• Read aloud and encourage comments on pictures.
Environment/Space	• Arrange an environment that is "child-proof" (safe) and "child-friendly" (exploration) for learning and discovery.
	• Provide safe spaces and room for rolling, sitting, crawling, standing and walking.

Toddlers – 24 to 36 months (age 2)
Parents, caregivers and teachers should:

Physical	• Provide simple books, puzzles, blocks or coloring materials for use and play.
	• Allow time for large motor activities such as running, jumping and dancing.
Cognitive	• Share cardboard books and read expressively to the child.
	• Provide simple art materials such as crayons, play dough and large colored paper to explore and use.
Emotional	• Give children options to make simple choices (choose between books to read, etc.) and feel a sense of control.
	• Assist a child in labeling and identifying feelings he or she is expressing.
Social	• Teach self-care skills and allow for gradual progress with feeding, dressing and toileting.
	• State rules and limits clearly and repeat them often.
Environment/Space	• Provide helpful toys and equipment, such as blocks, pull toys, stacking containers and puzzles.
	• Provide spaces or boxes for toys to explore, such as dress-up clothes and other props.

Preschool – 36 to 60 months (ages 3 and 4)
Parents, caregivers and teachers should:

Physical	• Encourage fine motor skills through sensory and craft materials such as finger paints, play dough, crayons, chalk and child scissors.
	• Provide opportunities for large motor activities such as running, jumping, climbing, dancing or throwing.
Cognitive	• Share basic concepts such as shapes, colors, sizes and counting.
	• Provide a "print-rich" environment to acquaint children with sounds, words and language.
Emotional	• Pay attention if children wish to share stories or do pretend play.
	• Give children opportunities for rest or a nap so they don't become overly tired or stressed, and also learn how to relax their bodies.
Social	• Play together with children in activities of interest to them.
	• Be responsive, warm and nurturing when children become upset.
Environment/Space	• Provide equipment to fit a preschooler's size, such as a potty chair, stool for washing hands, comfortable chair, etc.
	• Provide a space to put and keep personal items (coat, backpack, book, etc.).

School-Age – 60 months and older (ages 5 and higher)
Parents, caregivers and teachers should:

Physical	• Adapt care to the physical abilities of a child with special needs.
	• Provide materials for interactive games such as ball, catch, jump ropes or puppets.
Cognitive	• Play or provide games that allow children to develop and test memory skills.
	• Teach the alphabet and support learning of writing skills.
Emotional	• Listen to children and affirm their feelings and sense of worth.
	• Assist children in managing feelings and calming down if scared, upset or hurt.
Social	• Answer questions about events, groups or people of interest in the community.
	• Stop quarrels and help facilitate problem resolution if children argue.
Environment/Space	• Provide space for outdoor activities and play (play equipment, etc.).
	• A variety of play spaces exist (sensory, quiet, etc.).

Conclusion

Developmentally appropriate care and education for children is respectful of each child's unique needs and developing abilities. Care settings are more likely to reflect developmentally appropriate practices when they utilize qualified caregivers or teachers with knowledge, skills and experience in working with young children. Parents should be aware that the learning and development of their children depends on attentiveness to all aspects of a child's well-being. Physical, social, emotional and cognitive dimensions of child development all should receive attention in a high-quality setting that prioritizes developmentally appropriate care and education.

Recommended Resources

■ Books and Pamphlets

Child Care Resources from the University of Minnesota. (2006). Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Extension.

> *A series of 15 short publications designed for parents providing information on a variety of issues related to child care. These publications can be accessed on the Internet at www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/ familydevelopment/DE7268.html.*

■ Web Sites and Organizations

Child Care Resource and Referral. The national network of child care resource and referral offices is available in most counties and states across the nation. These groups have a great deal of information on child-care availability and quality. For further information, simply contact your local resource and referral (often called "R and R") agency.

Child Care Online. This is a rich online resource with information for parents, care providers and others seeking to learn about child care issues and options. It can be located at *http://childcare.net.*

National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies. This national organization provides a rich menu of resources and information on child care in the United States for everyone from the advocate to the parent to the care provider. It operates the Child Care Aware initiative, a national consumer education parent hotline, (800) 424-2246, and web resource. The organization's Web site can be accessed at *www.childcareaware.org.*

National Association for the Education of Young Children. This national organization serves parents, teachers and others in sharing information about the care and education of young children. Many resources are available from NAEYC. The organization's Web site can be accessed at *www.naeyc.org.*

National Child Care Information Center. NCCIC, a service of the federal government's Child Care Bureau, is a national clearinghouse and technical assistance center that links parents, providers, policymakers, researchers and the public to early care and education information. Its Web site can be accessed at *http://nccic.org.*

National Network for Child Care. This network and resource of the national Cooperative Extension System makes dozens of resources available on high-quality child care. The organization's Web site can be accessed at *www.nncc.org.*

References

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