



# Trust for Learning

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Re: NAEYC Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice

Dear Ms. Kempe:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the fourth edition of NAEYC’s Position Statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP). As the document acknowledges, DAP “is grounded in the research on child development and learning, in the professional knowledge base regarding educational effectiveness in early care and education, and in the knowledge that professional early childhood educators glean from their observations of and interactions with children and their families” — which are ever evolving and changing. Trust for Learning (the Trust) appreciates the continued effort to update standards of quality to improve early childhood practice. Over the years, this statement has been critical in helping to guide the field around the research, knowledge, and skills that impact early childhood experiences and promote the optimal development of each child.

At the Trust, our main goal is advancing equity in early learning, by making sure that each child has access to the highest quality early learning—what we call Ideal Learning. Throughout our history, we have been fortunate to work with and support many researchers and experts in early childhood development, who have informed our thinking and contributed scholarship to the broader early education field. As a result, we are pleased to offer our thoughts and recommendations below.

### Moving Away from “Best” Practice Terminology

The Trust appreciates NAEYC’s sensitivity regarding the use of the term “best” practice and its potential reflection of dominant culture, regardless of the best-available research. However, we question whether the dismissal of this term, without a replacement, diminishes DAP to a catchall statement with no agreed upon standards for children. As a



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result, we encourage NAEYC to reconsider the framing of this section of the report. In our view, “best practice” and “differentiated approaches” are not mutually exclusive. If terminology is a primary concern, perhaps “responsive practice” or “aligned practice” (meaning aligned with understanding of child, evidence base, standards, etc.) could be an acceptable alternative.

*Recommendation: suggest reconsidering dismissal of “best” practice or use other term referenced above.*

## Core Considerations in DAP

The Trust applauds the statement’s specific recognition that early childhood educators seek out knowledge and understanding in three core areas: what is known about the process of child development and learning in general, what is known about each child as an individual, and what is known about the social and cultural contexts affecting the delivery of early childhood education and care. Each of these considerations are essential lenses through which educators should view their work with young children.

The Trust agrees that the normative focus on child development mentioned in consideration 1 has tended to treat differences as deficits and often “helped to perpetuate systems of power and privilege.” We respectfully request however, that the last sentence on p.6 be rephrased to not include “inequities that can no longer be ignored,” since they never should have been ignored.

*Recommendation: rephrase last sentence on p. 6.*

In addition, we appreciate the acknowledgement in consideration 3 that US political culture often focuses on narrow measures of accountability that reflect and maintain systems of inequity, and limit teacher flexibility to serve the varying needs of students. In particular, we identify with the statement that “teacher-directed activities predominate in many classrooms, especially those serving children deemed “at-risk.” This systemic bias is important context to be aware of when looking to provide equitable learning opportunities for every child. We suggest, however, striking or rephrasing the last sentence on p. 8 regarding “school readiness.” As written, it suggests that children must meet “entry expectations” to be enrolled in school, which is forbidden by law.

*Recommendation: strike or rephrase last sentence on p. 8.*

## Principles of Child Development and Learning



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The Trust appreciates the articulation of principles about how young children develop and learn. Overall, the theory expressed in these pages is consistent with the [Principles of Ideal Learning Programs](#) developed and adopted by world-renowned early childhood approaches,<sup>1</sup> which we suggest referencing in the document as evidence of teacher voice. The organization of the statement's principles, however, seems somewhat uneven. For example, some principles contain considerably more description than others; some include examples and strategies to be used in practice, while others do not. As a result, we suggest creating a more uniform format in discussing each principle that will help with readability.

*Recommendation: suggest using a more uniform approach in describing each principle.*

In addition, there are a few areas (detailed below) in this section, where the Trust believes that the ascribed principles should be strengthened to better reflect current research and consensus within the field.

*Recommendation Principle 3: suggest inclusion of language in the last paragraph that demonstrates the importance of educators being able to understand where children are individually in their developmental trajectory and provide personalized, child-focused instruction.*

*Recommendation Principle 4: recommend that this principle specifically acknowledges that “young children learn through relationships.” While there is some mention of interactions with adults and peers, the overall importance of how relationships enable children to feel valued, recognized, and supported seems to be missing in this principle. In addition, the role that teachers play in fostering and modeling nurturing, authentic and honest engagement with children and families is paramount and deserves stronger mention.*

*Recommendation Principle 5: suggest that additional language be added to acknowledge the importance of the learning environment in “facilitating children’s exploration, independence and interaction.” While this principle mentions an important aspect of how young children develop and learn, the discussion of the learning environment could be much more robust in terms of stimulating children’s interests, ideas, emotions, and questions.*

## DAP in Action

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<sup>1</sup> Bank Street College of Education, Friends Center for Children, HighScope, Montessori, Reggio Emilia-Inspired, Tools of the Mind, and Waldorf



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The Trust appreciates the more in-depth discussion of DAP as it occurs within classrooms and programs through the United States. At times, however, it can be hard to distinguish between the description of the principle and the guidelines for practice. For example, the mention of relationships in section B of guideline 1 seems to be more appropriate to include within Principle 4 as stated above. In addition, some of the guidelines seem repetitive or too long, and would benefit from further refinement of the concepts included. The Trust offers the following recommendations in this regard.

*Recommendation Guideline 1: suggest condensing sections C, D, and E into one section on “Fostering a Respectful and Safe Environment.”*

*Recommendation Guideline 4: suggest deleting the first paragraph of this guideline as it seems out of place. In addition, suggest deleting sections A and B which seem duplicative of previously mentioned items in guidelines 1 and 2. Suggest combining sections D and E into one section, “Educators Effectively Implement Program Goals and Curriculum Across Developmental Domains.”*

*Recommendation for new Guideline TBD: recommend creating a new guideline entitled, “Creating an Environment to Promote Each Child’s Individual Learning and Development” comprised of current Guideline 4 sections C, F, and I. These sections speak primarily of the environment that a teacher works to facilitate as opposed to specific teaching strategies or interventions, and therefore warrant a separate guideline. Lastly, in addition to the language contained in Sections C, F and I, we suggest including text to specify that:*

- *Educators design experiences where children have access to a range of materials (sensory, expressive, natural, etc.) to stimulate their ideas and encourage expression.*
- *Educators cultivate an intentional, calm, and responsive pace which informs daily learning experiences, rhythms and routines.*

## Policy Recommendations

Lastly, while the statement on DAP seeks to address children’s learning and development from birth through age 8, the policy recommendations offered on pp. 30-31 are narrowly written and focus mainly on funding of and access to programs. There is little mention of policies that could improve instruction and programming for children from Kindergarten through third grade. For example, there is no mention of changing state education standards to address all domains of children’s development, or suggestions to reconfigure teacher licensure requirements to focus more on child development—two state-level



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policies that the Trust believes would have a significant impact on the delivery of DAP in schools. Likewise, there is no mention of policy recommendations regarding transitions or data sharing between programs, curriculum alignment within districts, or inclusive settings for children with disabilities.

If this statement is to be considered seriously by those in positions of power and oversight regarding Kindergarten through grade 3, there needs to be more thought given to appropriate policy recommendations that will support the provision of DAP in the early elementary grades. Also, given the importance of adequate compensation in the profession, we believe that there should be a separate statement supporting pay parity for early childhood educators with K-12 teachers.

*Recommendation: suggest more detailed policy recommendations focused on K-3 and include a recommendation regarding pay parity for early childhood educators.*

Finally, the Trust greatly appreciates your leadership in the field to refine and update the meaning of DAP as new science, research, and cultural understandings emerge. Thank you again for the opportunity to comment on this important statement. We look forward to continuing to work with NAEYC to guide the preparation and practice of those in our field and ensure that Ideal Learning is made real for every child. If you have any specific questions about our comments, please feel free to reach out to me directly.

Sincerely,

Chrisanne Gayl  
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Trust for Learning  
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