

Theoretical Principles of Child Development and Learning

The following are theoretical principles of child development and learning that are critical in developmentally appropriate practice (DAP). These principles are based on the work of Piaget, Vygotsky, Erikson, and others.

Principle	Practice
Children learn best when their physical needs are met and they feel psychologically safe and secure.	DAP respects children's biological needs. For example, children are not made to sit and attend to paperwork or listen to adult lectures for long periods of time. DAP calls for active play and periods of quiet, restful, activity. The environment is safe and secure where everyone is accepted.
Children construct knowledge.	Knowledge is constructed as a result of dynamic interactions between the individual and the physical and social environments. In a sense the child discovers knowledge through active experimentation. Central to experimentation is making "constructive errors" that are necessary to mental development. Children need to form their own hypotheses and keep trying them out through mental actions and physical manipulations - observing what happens, comparing their findings, asking questions, and discovering answers - and adjust the model or alter the mental structures to account for the new information.
Children learn through social interaction with other adults and other children.	A prime example is the parent-child relationship. The teacher encourages and fosters this relationship as well as relationships with peers and other adults by supporting the child in his or her efforts and later allowing the child to function independently. The teacher's role is one of supporting, guiding, and facilitating development and learning.
Children learn through play.	Play provides opportunities for exploration, experimentation, and manipulation that are essential for constructing knowledge and contributes to the development of representational thought. During play, children examine and refine their learning in light of the feedback they receive from the environment and other people. It is through play that children develop their imaginations and creativity. During the primary grades, children's play becomes more rule-oriented and promotes the development of autonomy and cooperation which contributes to social, emotional, and intellectual development.
Children's interests and "need to know" motivate learning.	Children have a need to make sense of their experiences. In a developmentally appropriate classroom, teachers identify what intrigues their children and then allow the students to solve problems together. Activities that are based on children's interests provide motivation for learning. This fosters a love of learning, curiosity, attention, and self-direction.
Human development and learning and are characterized by individual variation.	A wide range of individual variation is normal and to be expected. Each human being has an individual pattern and timing of growth development as well as individual styles of learning. Personal family experiences and cultural backgrounds also vary.