



BEING AGE- AND STAGE- APPROPRIATE

MEETING CHILDREN WHERE THEY ARE IN THEIR DEVELOPMENT IS CRUCIAL FOR THEIR LEARNING, DEVELOPMENT AND WELL-BEING.

Children learn in different ways. Today, the focus is on differentiated learning and catering to the diverse profiles of children. When teaching practices are developmentally appropriate and based on a child's strengths and interests, teachers can create meaningful learning opportunities to optimise his or her learning and development in all domains – physical, cognitive, social and emotional.

This approach stems from the understanding that children are unique and access learning in various ways. "Children develop at different paces. Developmental milestones serve as a reference for us to understand the strengths and needs of a developing child," says Ms Rathi Devi d/o Balachandran, Lead Curriculum Specialist (Curriculum & Programmes), National Institute of Early Childhood Development.

Ms Rathi also highlights the significance of culture in shaping developmentally appropriate practices (DAP). "Cultural background comprises one's values, beliefs and traditions. These affect a family's priorities and expectations on parenting practices, as well as how and what their children should be learning," she says. "DAP accommodates differences in parenting practices and allows for understanding and respect."

Beanstalk speaks to Ms Rathi, educators and parents to find out more about DAP in action in the preschool classroom and at home.

WHAT IS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF DAP?

Nirmala Sumathy: DAP is about using developmentally- and age-appropriate teaching strategies to leverage children's strengths and create an environment that is intentionally designed to support their learning and development. For instance, a three-year-old cannot be expected to learn the same way a six-year-old does! In DAP, educators see children as individuals. They consider each child's interests, age group and developmental stage, as well as individual

differences, when planning learning experiences. DAP also helps educators think about the support needed for either a child or a group of children.

Masyitah Binte Abdul Latif: The DAP approach avoids a 'one-size-fits-all' mentality. Instead, we adjust our teaching practices, materials and resources accordingly. It helps us focus on how we can make learning more meaningful, engaging and joyful for children.

HOW DO YOU ADOPT DAP WHEN THERE IS A STANDARDISED CURRICULUM?

Nirmala: The standardised curriculum in our preschool serves as a guide for teachers. It is important that they have the flexibility to modify the curriculum as well as their teaching practices and activities, based on children's individual needs and interests. My teachers and I observe how each child is learning and developing. Through a combination of structure and flexibility, we guide the children towards learning goals in ways relevant to them. We also conduct a termly review of the curriculum and propose recommendations bearing DAP in mind.

Masyitah: Our standard curriculum helps frame lesson planning and practices for most of the children in our preschool. However, we also adjust it according to DAP guidelines to better support children's diverse learning needs. This enables us to



DID YOU KNOW?

The concept of DAP was introduced in the mid-1980s by the United States-based National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). Since then, NAEYC has revised its Position Statement on DAP (including guidelines and recommendations) several times. The fourth and latest version, updated in 2020, recognises the growing racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity of the national and global populations. For more on DAP, go to www.naeyc.org/resources/developmentally-appropriate-practice.

tailor effective and meaningful learning experiences to meet both individual and group needs. To ensure the curriculum is relevant, we review it regularly based on DAP as well as the children's levels of engagement and progress. These observations are also shared with the whole team and the children's parents. Collectively, we can better understand and support the children.

HOW DO YOU PUT DAP INTO ACTION AT YOUR CENTRE?

Nirmala: We do this by bringing together the different learning areas into the curriculum across all age groups. This integrated curriculum builds connections between concepts and learning areas, which supports children's holistic development. It is implemented through an experiential, hands-on approach, as we know the brain learns best this way.

For example, in our Outdoor Learning curriculum, children observe the life cycle of a banana plant as it flowers and bears fruit. The learning process integrates various domains such as language, numeracy, discovery of the world and motor skills development. While younger children observe and learn that the fruit changes colour as it ripens, older ones count the bananas, weigh them, and explore the uses of the banana leaf. When the bananas are ripe, the older children make banana cake and have it for tea.

Masyitah: At our centre, DAP informs all aspects of teaching and learning processes – from the content we design, to the types of play provisions, to teacher-child and child-child interactions. By recognising that children have their own unique strengths, interests, learning styles and challenges, we deliver the learning experience in appropriate ways.

For example, having observed that younger children like music and make-believe, teachers make stories come alive with puppets, role play and songs. Older children may appreciate experimenting with plot twists, creating their own story endings, or imagining the emotions of a storybook character.

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MRS NIRMALA SUMATHY, 59
Principal, Marymount Preschool

Rathi Devi d/o Balachandran: When deciding which techniques and strategies are developmentally appropriate, we need to bear in mind every single learner's unique strengths, interests and needs. Educators and parents can ask themselves, "Is it meaningful and engaging to my child? Does it allow my child to participate in an enjoyable way? How else could I have planned this activity?"

HOW DOES DAP BENEFIT CHILDREN'S LEARNING?

Masyitah: DAP takes into account the ages and stages of child development as well as individual differences. When learning about a topic like change, younger children usually understand the concept better by observing it in a physical object close at hand, such as a plant's growth from seed to sprout over time. Older children, who are better able to grasp more complex concepts, may be interested to find out about cloud changes through books and the Internet. Each age group experiences the concept in line with their development. With DAP, teachers are continually reflecting on their teaching practices and how best to ensure that children are engaged and learning meaningfully.

Nirmala: Our integrated curriculum is designed to promote optimal learning and help children achieve their individual learning goals. Children are encouraged to ask questions, while teachers ask questions that provoke creative and critical thinking. If a child has difficulty understanding a particular concept, teachers use visual aids and verbal cues to assist learning.

PARENTS, HOW DO YOU ASSESS WHICH ACTIVITIES ARE SUITABLE FOR YOUR CHILD AT HOME?

Alan Lai: Knowing my child well is fundamental to assessing which activities are suitable. That means spending time with her, being present, and putting away mobile devices to better engage, observe and listen to her. Blindly trying out recommended activities based on age may not always work, as every child is unique and develops in his or her own way. For instance,



“I believe the feedback we share with parents helps them understand their children's learning styles and strengths.”

MS MASYITAH BINTE ABDUL LATIF, 30
Teacher, Cavenur Kindergarten

many parental guides suggest learning the piano is good for children's development. But our daughter Anne was more into drawing at first, so we gave her space to express herself with a pencil and paper. When she started to show interest in music, we gave her a few musical instruments to choose from. She eventually decided on the piano, and it was then we felt she was ready to give music a shot.

Siti Nurliyana Binte Smaat: I refer to books and the Internet to get ideas for suitable activities. When my children were younger, we focused on strengthening their core muscles, so we did a lot of outdoor activities. They also enjoy Lego bricks; drawing, cutting and pasting; and pretend play, such as imagining themselves as chefs in a restaurant using kitchen utensils like wooden spoons and pans. These activities build their creativity and confidence. Now that Uwais is turning six, we see he can take on some responsibilities. We have started giving him simple household chores, such as arranging shoes and keeping his room tidy.

EDUCATORS, WHAT DOES A DAP-FOCUSED CLASSROOM LOOK LIKE?

Masyitah: Every part of the classroom is purposefully designed to support children's learning and development. For instance, our classrooms have a variety of art and craft materials to cater to different interests and developmental stages. For younger children, we have mirrors in their classrooms as they are still learning about themselves. Mirrors

make them realise, "Oh, this is what I look like" or "This is what I look like when I'm happy". It develops their self-awareness and helps them regulate emotions. As for older children, their classrooms have dedicated spaces for small-group discussions and different materials to support collaborative play.

Nirmala: Our open-space classrooms and learning centres — such as the dramatic play corner and the science corner — allow for a mix of self-directed play, guided play and small-group learning. Child-height shelves and storage containers enable children to access and explore materials independently. Classroom activities are followed by outdoor play, where gross motor activities like running and skipping allow teachers to observe and assess children's motor skills development in an authentic setting.

Rathi: A DAP-focused classroom considers the children's family and cultural backgrounds. For instance, some toddlers may not know how to use a spoon, as they may use their hands to eat or are spoon-fed at home. Encouraging parents to share their home practices and routines will help educators better understand and support the children in acquiring new skills and adjusting to the centre's routines. There should also be opportunities for peer interaction and group projects to build language, communication and critical thinking skills, as well as facilitate social development.

WHAT ARE SOME CHALLENGES FACED WHEN IMPLEMENTING DAP?

Masyitah: Though DAP can make a big difference to a child's learning, the planning takes time. Challenges arise when teachers are overwhelmed with tasks and responsibilities. They may not have enough time to pause and reflect on their

SETTING PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS

Ms Charmaine Teo, Vice President of the Association for Early Childhood Educators (Singapore) or AECES for short, shares how its Code of Ethics guides teaching practices and strengthens professionalism.



The AECES Code of Ethics, published in 2004 and updated in 2015, serves as a reference for preschool educators to clarify their thinking and prioritise their responsibilities for children. It guides ethical and professional behaviour; ensures high quality care and education for children; builds a strong early childhood fraternity; and marks respect for children, families, the community, and the profession.

EC professionals can encounter challenging situations or conflicting responsibilities during a typical preschool day. For instance, a parent prefers her child to not take afternoon naps as he has difficulty going to bed early at night. However, the teacher observes the child getting tired by the afternoon. Bearing in mind the need to balance responsibilities and obligations towards the parent and the child, the teacher can work out an arrangement with the parent to ease the child into a shortened naptime, such as letting him do quiet activities (e.g., drawing, reading) before taking a nap. Working together with the parent supports both the parent's and the child's needs.

Here is a four-step approach that EC professionals can adopt when practising the Code of Ethics:

1. What is the challenging situation or issue?
2. Reflect on your professional values, responsibilities and obligations.
3. What might an early childhood professional do in this situation? Discuss with colleagues if necessary.
4. What might be the implications and how can you address these?

For more information and examples of case studies, refer to www.aeces.org/membership/code-of-ethics.

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MR ALAN LAI, 45
CEO of a tech company, father of Anne Lai, 5

THIS SPREAD On Masyitah: Outfit model's own. On Alan: Outfit Mango. On Anne: Outfit Mango Kids

teaching practices and interactions with children. Our centre encourages a culture of reflection. We have dedicated time for teachers to come together to discuss and brainstorm ways to tweak teaching practices, ask questions, clarify doubts, and modify activities to better suit the children's needs.

Rathi: It is important for educators to have a good grounding in child development and be open to learning. In this regard, embrace DAP and the merits they bring. Apart from training, it is also important to set aside time for discussions with peers or mentors on actual classroom situations and challenges. DAP should be a key part of teacher professionalism as this supports a teacher's understanding of different learner profiles, equips them with the knowledge and skills to engage all children, and enhances learning outcomes.

PARENTS, HOW HAS YOUR CHILD'S TEACHER HELPED YOU SUPPORT HIS OR HER LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT?

Siti: When Uwais was adjusting to the preschool environment, he had difficulty managing his emotions and had frequent meltdowns in class. During my discussions with his teacher, she suggested breathing techniques and counting backwards to help him calm down. These strategies really worked! Uwais has since settled down and now enjoys learning.

Alan: We once received feedback from Anne's teacher that she needed more practice writing Chinese characters. This

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MDM SITI NURLIYANA BINTE SAMAAT, 35
Housewife, mother of Uwais Muazzam Bin Muhammad Nazmi, 5, and Asmaa Sofiyah Binte Muhammad Nazmi, 2



surprised me as she has good pen grip and can draw well. I realised that because we had been letting her draw freely, Anne was less skilled in writing Chinese characters, which are more structured. I started creating dotted lines of Chinese characters for her to follow, while still giving her space to draw creatively. Within half a year, her Chinese character-writing skills improved vastly.

EDUCATORS, HOW DO YOU SUPPORT AND WORK WITH PARENTS TO ENSURE DAP IS SUPPORTED AT HOME?

Nirmala: Our centre has sharing sessions every term with parents on their children's learning and development. We also send out home-learning kits with activities listed by age group. For instance, together with their parents, K2 children had to adopt a tree in their neighbourhood, learn its name, and observe its growth. They were encouraged to journal their observations and share these during 'Show & Tell' sessions. We also encourage parents to provide feedback, so that we can improve the children's learning.

Masyitah: I believe the feedback we share with parents helps them understand their children's learning styles and strengths. Practical examples we provide also help parents better support their children. I make it a point to make myself available, especially during dismissal time, so that parents and I can share and exchange any information or anecdotes about their children.

Rathi: Educators should respect that parents know their children best in terms of the latter's preferences, interests and needs. It is hence important for educators to seek parents' inputs about their children. Both parties will then have a more comprehensive and mutual understanding of the child's developmental goals, as well as suitable strategies in preschool and at home.

On Asmaa: Outfit model's own. On Siti: Outfit model's own. On Uwais: Outfit Mango Kids.

AT THE CHILD'S LEVEL

PROFESSOR IRAM SIRAJ EXPLAINS HOW EARLY CHILDHOOD PRACTITIONERS CAN IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH CHILDREN, WHICH IS KEY TO GOOD TEACHING PRACTICE.

Effective early learning combines positive adult-child relationships with meaningful activities. Educators provide intentional engagement and warm, responsive interactions, while maintaining a setting that is orderly and predictable yet not overly structured or formal.

Alongside research showing the importance of such intentional and relational pedagogy in early childhood education, the concept of Sustained Shared Thinking (SST) has become an important practice. SST occurs in high-quality interactions where practitioners are actively engaged in children's learning and extend their thinking through communication. Characteristics of SST include tuning in, showing genuine interest, respecting the children's decisions and choices, inviting children to elaborate, offering an alternative viewpoint and asking open-ended questions.

SST can only be achieved when children's emotional well-being is also supported. This in turn requires the development of positive relationships — between educators and parents, between adults and children, as well as between children themselves. Such relationships provide a safe base for young children to explore the interpersonal and intellectual aspects of early learning, while promoting early self-regulation.

TOOLKIT FOR TEACHERS

Practitioners can improve their skills in SST and support the emotional well-being of children aged two to six years by using the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWS) Scale. This tool supports the development of strong relationships, effective communication, aspects of self-regulation and concept development.

In particular, the SSTEWS Scale looks at the quality of interactions between adults and children, and between the children themselves. It considers the responsiveness of adults to children — and how they intentionally support children's learning and development — through descriptors of inadequate, good and excellent practice. Fundamental to the SSTEWS Scale is the understanding that to successfully engage in SST, adults need

MEASURING SSTEWS

The SSTEWS Scale consists of five main categories (each with sub-categories):

1. Building trust, confidence and independence
2. Social and emotional well-being
3. Supporting and extending language and communication
4. Supporting learning and critical thinking
5. Assessing learning and language

Including sub-categories, there are 15 items to be assessed on a scale ranging from 1 (Inadequate) to 7 (Excellent).

to know children well and develop positive relationships with them. Adults require a good understanding of the children's current development, their cultural heritage and achievements, as well as their feelings, behaviours and responses to learning. An effective early childhood educator should be able to recognise when children are thinking, sensitively extend their language and periods of concentration, and encourage their perseverance.

Educators can use the SSTEWS Scale as part of their self-assessment, to support staff training, or to improve their own early years practice. For optimal impact, professional development should be incorporated into the process as well.



PROFESSOR IRAM SIRAJ

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Professor Siraj has an international reputation for her longitudinal research and policy expertise. She has co-directed influential studies such as the United Kingdom-based *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years* (dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/4650/1/RR356.pdf), which first developed the concept of SST. She is the co-author of several complementary scales that measure quality in settings with young children, including the SSTEWS Scale.