



# Developmentally Appropriate Practice: A Sign of Quality Child Care

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Parents want quality child care for their children. This fact sheet tells parents how early childhood professionals define **quality child care** and **developmentally appropriate practice**. As consumers, Oklahoma families need to know the criteria for quality child care. Parents want to know what to look for when they visit programs and what questions to ask directors and providers of child care.

Most of all, parents need to understand why developmentally appropriate practices are best for their children. Developmentally appropriate programs match activities to the age and ability of the child. Providers respect the child's family background and interests. Play is the key method for learning.

### Quality Child Care Values Each Child's

- age
- ability
- personal interests
- family background
- right to play

**Benefits**—Children's programs that follow developmentally appropriate practice guidelines are quality programs. Research tells us that children in quality programs have better mental development, advanced social skills, positive attitudes, later school success, less stress, and warm relationships with child care staff. Children from low income, less educated and minority families benefit to a greater extent from quality programs.

**Location**—Parents can find developmentally appropriate programs in many settings such as churches, public schools, corporate business, and family homes. It is not the location, but the activities and quality of care that make a program right for children.

**Cost**—Parents can find poor quality and good quality child care at a variety of prices. Developmentally appropriate child care programs are sometimes more expensive.

**Respect**—Individual parents and families have their own values and needs. Developmentally appropriate programs honor family background. They respect and support the family's values as well as their language and spiritual practices. Children and parents feel safe expressing their family culture. The play activities, music, language, and food in the program show children the richness of our diverse society.

## How Did Developmentally Appropriate Practice Begin?

For many years, teachers, parents and child care providers saw how young children learn through play. Studies of child development, play, reading, and writing show that young children learn differently than adults. Young children must be active while they learn. They must experience first hand and in very real ways how things work, how spoken words can be written, and how reading helps them function in the world. Structured learning activities such as paper and pencil tasks, workbook pages, drill, and sitting and listening for long periods of time do not work for young children.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children represents the early childhood profession. Their book on developmentally appropriate practice and accreditation criteria define quality programs for young children. These are now available in brochures for parents, from Oklahoma State University's Child Care Aware.

Developmentally appropriate environments help children develop in all areas — physical, social, creative, emotional, and cognitive. No one area of development is more important than another in the early years of a child's life. It is often not possible to separate children's development in one area from another. For example, as a child masters a physical skill such as climbing, self-esteem grows. The new physical skill makes it possible for the child to learn more about the world and to interact with friends.

Children use problem solving to learn and perfect each new mental, social or physical skill. This integrated approach to learning is one of the hallmarks of a developmentally appropriate program. Teachers will plan for several areas of development for each activity in their schedule. Beware of a program that stresses one or two areas of development such as academics or sports. Look for a balanced program with emphasis on all areas of your child's development. Learning through play enhances development and reduces stress in young children.

Television, videotapes, audio tapes and interactive computer software may be used, however, video or daily TV programs should not be part of every day's schedule. Adults must be present and interacting with the children as they watch television. Other choices of activity must be available.

Children, especially infants and toddlers, need continuity over time — each day and year after year with the same adults and children. Staff stability is a sign of quality.

## Why would programs not use developmentally appropriate practice?

Social changes such as women working outside the home, single parenting and welfare reform make great demands on child care. In recent years more children have been entering preschool programs at younger ages. Early childhood programs have been growing and adjusting quickly. Teachers that do not have the required training, the needed equipment, or an appropriate curriculum for working with younger children are likely to use methods and content designed for older children. At the same time, public schools experience pressure to do a better job of teaching the basics of reading, writing and mathematics. These changes have resulted in younger children being taught material suitable for older children. First graders try to learn what third graders used to learn. Kindergartners and 4 year olds are doing first grade work. Teacher directed activity is more common. Children in kindergarten sit in reading circles and complete workbook pages, instead of engaging in active learning and meaningful play.

Some parents and some teachers are unaware of the learning style of young children. They mistakenly think they help children by teaching them what they will learn in elementary school: letters, counting to twenty, spelling, and writing their names. Some parents and teachers keep children out of school or retain them in kindergarten because a readiness test classed them as immature. Children suffer from stress related illnesses and school failure because of these inappropriate expectations. Parents, teachers and young children feel a sense of failure. Preschoolers typically eager to go to school are hating school.

Management problems develop when large numbers of children use a facility designed for a small group. Some programs solve these problems by using inappropriate practices. They show videos and television programs to keep large groups of children occupied in a small space.



**Gaining block building skills boosts self-esteem, helps children to learn more about the world around them and to interact with friends.**

## Pressures on Young Children's Programs

- More children attend preschool.
- Younger children are in child care.
- Public schools stress basics and drill.
- Public is concerned about school failure.
- Kindergarten entrance tests are stressful.
- Low test scores result.
- U.S. education seems inferior to international competition.
- Families are unwilling and unable to pay the cost of quality child care.
- Publishers sell inappropriate curriculum and equipment to schools.

They require children to line up for activities and to wait for a turn to use the toilet, wash their hands, eat, go outdoors, view a product, or use equipment. Instead of integrating the curriculum into meaningful play, they have separate blocks of time and special teachers for art, music, reading, physical education, career education, and computers.

## How do I know if a program is Developmentally Appropriate?

**Caregiver—Child Relationship.** Parents want a warm and loving person to care for their children. Research supports the importance of this relationship. Staff characteristics are the most important criteria for determining quality care. A trained provider will interact well with children because of her knowledge and expectations of behavior for that age group. A developmentally appropriate provider knows and works with each child as an individual. Individual children have their own interests that motivate their learning and good behavior. Developmentally appropriate programs value individual interests as strengths that help children learn and get along well with others. Practices in quality child care programs boost a child's intellectual and social development. The teacher builds on the child's individual interests for successful learning and friendships. This balance of *age appropriate* with *individual interests* is the basis for developmentally appropriate practice.

**A trained child care provider knows one of the most important things she can do is to help a child develop self confidence.** Self confidence is the basis for forming good relationships with others. Self confidence provides a firm foundation for learning experiences now and in the future.

Some interactions that parents can see when they visit developmentally appropriate programs include caregivers who respond quickly to children, listen carefully, and speak at the child's eye level. They will see lots of smiling, hugging and expressions of enjoyment. Providers will share a sense of humor appropriate to the age of children in their care. Providers will help children learn about and respect different people.

The child care staff quietly and privately guide the children. They teach children how to behave well. They do not keep telling children what they should not do. Discipline suits the misbehavior. For example, if a child

runs with scissors, the teacher shows the child how to sit and use the scissors on paper. The teacher guides a child that is unable to stay seated to another activity in which such energy is more appropriate. The teacher permits the child to use the scissors while seated.

Staff never shake, hit, jerk, or roughly handle a child. Parents should not hear teachers use yelling, name calling or sarcasm with a child. There should not be any punishing or threatening, especially not in association with food, rest or toileting. Caregivers should not ignore physical or verbal attacks of one child on another, nor punish the whole group for the misbehavior of one or a few children.

**Setting:** In appropriate settings, teachers arrange learning centers in which small groups of children can work and play. These centers may be for different types of play: quiet, messy and active. Most programs have an area for block building, art, water play, playing house, music, books, table toys, and games. For school-aged children, there is an area for doing homework or projects. What most adults remember from their own public school experiences will not be in a quality early childhood program. There are no individual desks where each child sits to listen to the teacher and do work. There is no large space where everyone has to do the same thing at the same time.

Children can choose to be with a friend or alone. This increases success in getting along with others. They do not need to compete for materials or attention. It is easier to take turns. They learn to listen to others, express themselves, and eventually understand another person's viewpoint.

**The relationship between families and caregivers** makes an important partnership for quality child care. Developmentally appropriate practices require that the teachers develop curriculum based on the *individual interests* and *family background* of the children. The child care provider learns the child's interests and family background from the child's family. The parents learn about children from the child care provider. A teacher who has worked with hundreds of children that are your child's age probably knows what is developmentally appropriate for your child's *age* and *ability*. She knows ways to help children maximize their learning through play. You know what interests or frustrates your child. Share this information. Together you and your child care provider can make a wonderful partnership for your child.

**Training** develops a caregiver's skill in working with children. A caregiver with the Child Development Associate credential or an early childhood education degree or certification provides better quality care than a provider with a degree in an unrelated field. Oklahoma encourages quality care by requiring specialized training for staff in all licensed child care centers and family child care homes. Respect your child care provider's knowledge of children. Ask questions. Use her expertise to help you and your child.

**Numbers** are important. Check on the number of teachers and the number of children. The more staff per child, the more attention your child is likely to receive. This will also provide an optimal opportunity for the provider to establish a nurturing relationship with your child. When you visit during the day or take your child to and from the child care program, notice the number of

children for each adult. See if children get individual attention. Smaller group sizes and lower staff to child ratios indicate quality interactions among staff and children and developmentally appropriate curriculum.

**Staff Turnover:** Low staff turnover is another indicator of quality. You want to be sure your child can have the same caregiver for at least a year. You want your child care provider to have experience. Look for programs where staff have enjoyed working with children for several years and will continue. The average change in Oklahoma child care staff is over 44%. That means that within the year almost half of the teachers in a program will change. Look for a program with annual staff changes of less than 25%.

**Materials:** Materials children select are available on low shelves and labeled for easy storage. Children can choose from a variety of interesting and challenging activities. By offering many activities for children to choose rather than everyone doing the same thing at the same time, each child can choose an activity that is at her level of interest and ability. This way, the program meets the needs of different learners in one setting. The opportunities for success are frequent. The chance of failure is rare.

Children have choices in the use of materials. For instance, an art activity may have guidelines on safe ways to use art supplies. The child will have a choice on *how* their art will look. The teacher will make sure as many activities as possible allow children individual expression and several ways to succeed. Caregivers do not have every child make the exact same Easter bunny. The process of using the materials is more important than what the final product looks like. Coloring books or pre-drawn pages are not part of the art curriculum. If you see art projects that all look the same, 15 Valentines of the same size, color, and pattern or coloring on copied sheets, the program is probably *inappropriate* for young children. If you see different designs, colors, shapes, and drawings you do not recognize, the program is probably appropriate.



**In developmentally appropriate programs, adults respond quickly to children, listen carefully, and speak at the child's eye level.**



**The process is more important than the picture. Activities allow for individual expression and success.**

**Daily Schedule:** The daily schedule provides for a balance of indoor and outdoor play, quiet and active play, small group and large group activity. The day may include some teacher directed activity if appropriate for that age. It is usually a brief period of time, 5-20 minutes, depending on the children's ages.

The daily schedule will not have time limits for reading, mathematics, art, science, and social studies as adults may remember from their school days. Quality programs integrate the curriculum. All areas of learning are happening all the time.

The schedule gives some routine and security to the child's day. Breakfast, lunch, snacks, and naps occur at the same time every day for everyone except infants who set their own schedules. The schedule gives children large blocks of time for supervised play inside and out-of-doors. They can count on this happening every day. Within these schedules, the teacher allows some flexibility to meet individual needs, interests and spontaneous events such as a delivery truck that interests the children.

It is not appropriate for all the children to use the rest room at the same time. Waiting in line is not appropriate for preschool age children. Children should use the rest room as they need it. This way they learn to be independent. Developmentally appropriate programs give patience and support to children at important times in the daily schedule. Caregivers will not rush children. They will take advantage of opportunities to visit with and meet the needs of individual children.

Beware if you see children lining up to do the same thing at the same time or waiting in line for others. You should never see children required to stay in a straight line with no talking. These are signs of a developmentally inappropriate program. In appropriate programs you may see children waiting for a minute or two to begin an activity.

**Curriculum:** The curriculum is everything that goes on throughout the day. Chances for learning occur during play and routines like snack, lunch and rest times. Children learn good health practices, positive social interactions, independence in self-care and decision making, as well as science, mathematics, music, art, language, and social studies.

The caregiver plans learning activities after seeing the children's interests and abilities. Children learn the same

### Staff to Child Ratios Within Group Size

Age of Children	Group Size									
	6	8	10	12	14	16	18	20	22	24
Infants (birth to 12 mos.)	1:3	1:4								
Toddlers (12-24 mos.)	1:3	1:4	1:5	1:4						
2-year-olds (24 to 30 mos.)		1:4	1:5	1:6						
2 1/2-year-olds (30-36 mos.)		1:5	1:6	1:7						
3-year-olds					1:7	1:8	1:9	1:10		
4-year-olds						1:8	1:9	1:10		
5-year-olds						1:8	1:9	1:10		
6-to 8-year olds								1:10	1:11	1:12
9-to-12-year-olds										1:12

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thing in a variety of activities. They learn a variety of things in one activity. For instance, learning colors can take place in art, through songs and stories, through table games, cooking activities, and in costumes for play. There is no need to have children sit down and teach them the color red all at one time. There are many opportunities throughout the day for children to learn about colors as they actively work with materials. The children who already know about colors are not bored. They attend to other things like shape.

Trained child care teachers know that children grow according to predictable developmental patterns. They match activities to the children's age and stage. For instance, children younger than three will have difficulty sharing. To reduce the conflicts over toys, a teacher provides more than one of each toy. The teachers model sharing as they work together. When a child does share, the teachers consistently compliment and encourage the child's sharing. In an *inappropriate* program, the adults would impose sharing before children are developmentally ready to share, then they punish children for not sharing. This results in frustration, behavior problems and unhappiness for children, parents and staff.

Look for activities planned for an individual child. For example, you told the teachers that your family goes camping on weekends. The teacher puts out a tent, sleeping bags and picnic supplies for the children to use in play. A caregiver will provide musical instruments and recorded music for a child who shows an interest in music. After a child has been in the hospital, the teacher puts books and objects related to hospitals in the classroom for the children to use. The child can tell others about the experience and play through fears and concerns. Individual children and their families feel valued when these activities relate to their interests and cultural backgrounds.

A trained provider will not rush children to be ready for the next stage of development. Living this year fully is more important than getting an early start on next year's curriculum. Children with diverse interests and learning styles do not experience boredom and frustration when the program offers creative activities and challenges so children can learn at their own pace.

**Family Communication:** Quality early childhood programs involve parents. The staff and parents make a partnership. Beware of a program that does not let parents visit, has little communication with families, uses a drive through for parents to drop off and pick up their children, or makes adults feel uncomfortable. Quality child care programs welcome parents to visit, observe, and share in the decisions about the child's care. Staff encourage parents to be in the classrooms and on the playground to enjoy time with the children and staff.

Talk with the teachers daily about your child's development and experiences in child care. A trained provider shares valuable information about children's growth. She knows if your child's developing physical skills are correct for his age. Talk about your child's ability to speak, listen, and follow directions. Ask for examples of social growth observed in play situations. Art work shows developing skills in pre-reading and writing. Share your child's problem solving experience in block constructions, art activities and in dealing with other children. When parents need to change child care, the provider will work



**Quality child care programs welcome parents to linger in the classroom to enjoy some time with the children and staff.**

with them to help their child make the adjustment to a new program.

## Keeping Current

Accreditation by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Academy for Early Childhood Programs tells families that the child care center meets the criteria of a developmentally appropriate program. The National Association for Family Child Care has an accreditation process for family child care providers. The Council for Early Childhood Professional Recognition grants the Child Development Associate (CDA) credential to professionals who use developmentally appropriate practices. Colleges grant degrees and certification in early childhood education. If your child care provider does not have professional credentials, consider a teacher who does or encourage your provider to pursue training. Professional credentials and accreditation require parent statements about the providers and program. The parent's role and opinion are crucial to quality. Be an active supporter of child care training, credentials and accreditation.

Some programs lose accreditation. If so, ask why. The answer may be a temporary delay or something quite serious. Well-qualified providers may move to other programs. Parents are the consumers who purchase quality child care for their children. Parents must pay attention to staff changes. Good teachers make good programs. A loss of trained child care staff usually causes a loss of accreditation. Evaluate each change by looking at your child's experience. Is the new teacher using developmentally appropriate practices? If so, you and your child will probably adjust well to the change. If not, consider changing child care arrangements. You may want to follow the teacher to the new program. Remember child care is not a building. Child care is a program of children, families and staff who value the development of each, unique child.

## Resources

### OSU Cooperative Extension Fact Sheets

Call your local Cooperative Extension Office.

- T-2220 Selecting Quality Family Child Care
- T-2322 Selecting Quality Child Care
- T-2323 Selecting A Quality Child Care Center

### OSU Cooperative Extension Child Care Aware Materials

Call your local Cooperative Extension Office or Child Care Aware at 1-800-799-1699.

- CCA 125 Beginning Child Care: Before Your Child's First Day
- CCA 126 Beginning Child Care: First Day Tips
- CCA 127 Introducing Your Child to the Child Care Provider
- CCA 128 Helping Your Child Adjust to Child Care
- CCA 129 Choosing Someone to Care for Your Child at Home
- CCA 130 When Friends or Relatives Care for Your Child

### OSU Cooperative Extension Videotape Library

Call your local Cooperative Extension Office.

- VT 312 Child Care Alternatives
- VT 440 Choosing Quality Child Care

### Oklahoma Department of Human Services Publications

Call your county Department of Human Services Office.

- DHS Pub. No. 87-91. The ABC's of Quality Child Care: Parents Handbook.

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**1-800-799-1699**

## Developmentally Appropriate Practice Checklist

### Developmentally Appropriate Practice

- ✓ Trained teachers or providers
- ✓ Child Development Associate
- ✓ Early childhood degree or Certification
- ✓ Experienced staff, 75% return each year.
- ✓ Enough adults for the number of children so all get individual attention.
- ✓ Small groups of 10-15 children in a room.
- ✓ Children use activities in different centers at their own pace.
- ✓ Play is the means of learning.
- ✓ Teachers note children's progress by watching specific skills used in play and review of art materials and constructions over time.

### Developmentally Inappropriate Practice

- ✓ Untrained staff
- ✓ Degrees in unrelated field
- ✓ New staff; 75% or more leave each year.
- ✓ Not enough adults to give children all individual attention.
- ✓ Large groups of 20-30 children in a room.
- ✓ Teachers choose activities and direct all the children as a whole group.
- ✓ Learning through worksheets and working at desks.
- ✓ Teachers use tests to label and assess the children. Specific levels indicate pass or fail.

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