

Basics of Developmentally Appropriate Practice

An Introduction for Teachers of Children 3 to 6

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The Main Idea

What Is Developmentally Appropriate Practice?

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Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) means teaching young children in ways that

- ◆ **meet children where they are**, as individuals and as a group; and
- ◆ **help each child reach challenging and achievable goals** that contribute to his or her ongoing development and learning.

There's a little more to it than that, but that's the main idea.

For early childhood teachers, understanding how young children learn and develop is essential. The more you can know about and tune into the way the children in your class think and learn, the more effective and satisfying your work with them will be. You will gain a clearer sense of direction to guide your actions, from setting up the classroom to planning curriculum.

Meeting children where they are

Our own school-day memories are likely to be full of laboring over worksheets and tests or sitting in desks while listening to the teacher lecture. These images don't give us much help for creating good early childhood classrooms. Elsewhere in this book, you'll be reading more about how young children learn

Teachers must know
where the children
stand. i.e.: We know that
a 1st grader is just
learning to + and -
so we aren't going
to teach * and ÷

and how this varies with age and level of development. A broad picture of learning and development and what children are like at different ages, however, is not all you need in order to teach in a developmentally appropriate way. You won't meet with much success if you consider only what is "typical" of an age group and if you try to teach children in a one-size-fits-all way. Let's step out of the early childhood setting for a moment and visit an everyday scene that illustrates both of these points.

Coach Todd is a winning soccer coach in a league for girls ages 13–15. He has a good sense of what girls this age enjoy, what they're capable of, and what's usually tough for them, and he has experience in what works in coaching them. Bringing this general knowledge with him on the first day of practice, he knows he won't use the advanced techniques he might with college varsity players, nor will he start out too simply by explaining, "You use your foot to kick the ball." He can make some general plans based on his understanding of what is typical of this age group.

Now, as this season's girls take the field for the first time, Coach Todd watches each one closely and also watches how the team plays together. He gets a feel for each player—her strengths and weaknesses, her temperament, how much experience she has. Based on all this, the coach decides where to start the girls' training, and then keeps watching and making adjustments for each individual player and the team as a whole as the season goes along.

A successful coach like Coach Todd knows he has to meet learners where they are, as individuals and as a group. Pitch the instruction too low and you not only waste learners' time but also show disrespect; pitch it too high and they feel incompetent and frustrated. This is a basic fundamental of any teaching.

Good classroom teachers continually observe children's play and their interaction with the physical environment and with other children in order to learn about each child's interests, abilities, and developmental progress. On the basis of this individualized information, along with general knowledge about the age group, we plan experiences that enhance children's learning and

main quote.

development. With a classroom of 4-year-olds, for example, meeting learners where they are might look something like this:

Marica notices that Tim has become fascinated with an anthill on the playground and suggests he get the magnifying glass to examine the ants and their activities more closely. A little later she checks back to find him on his stomach in the dirt, magnifying glass in hand. She decides that tomorrow she'll bring in a book on ants, maybe even help the child find a good website on what ants do—or both of these things.

Because some children in her class understand only a little English, Lisa knows she will want to provide nonverbal clues to meaning wherever possible, for example, pictures, objects, gestures, and demonstrations.

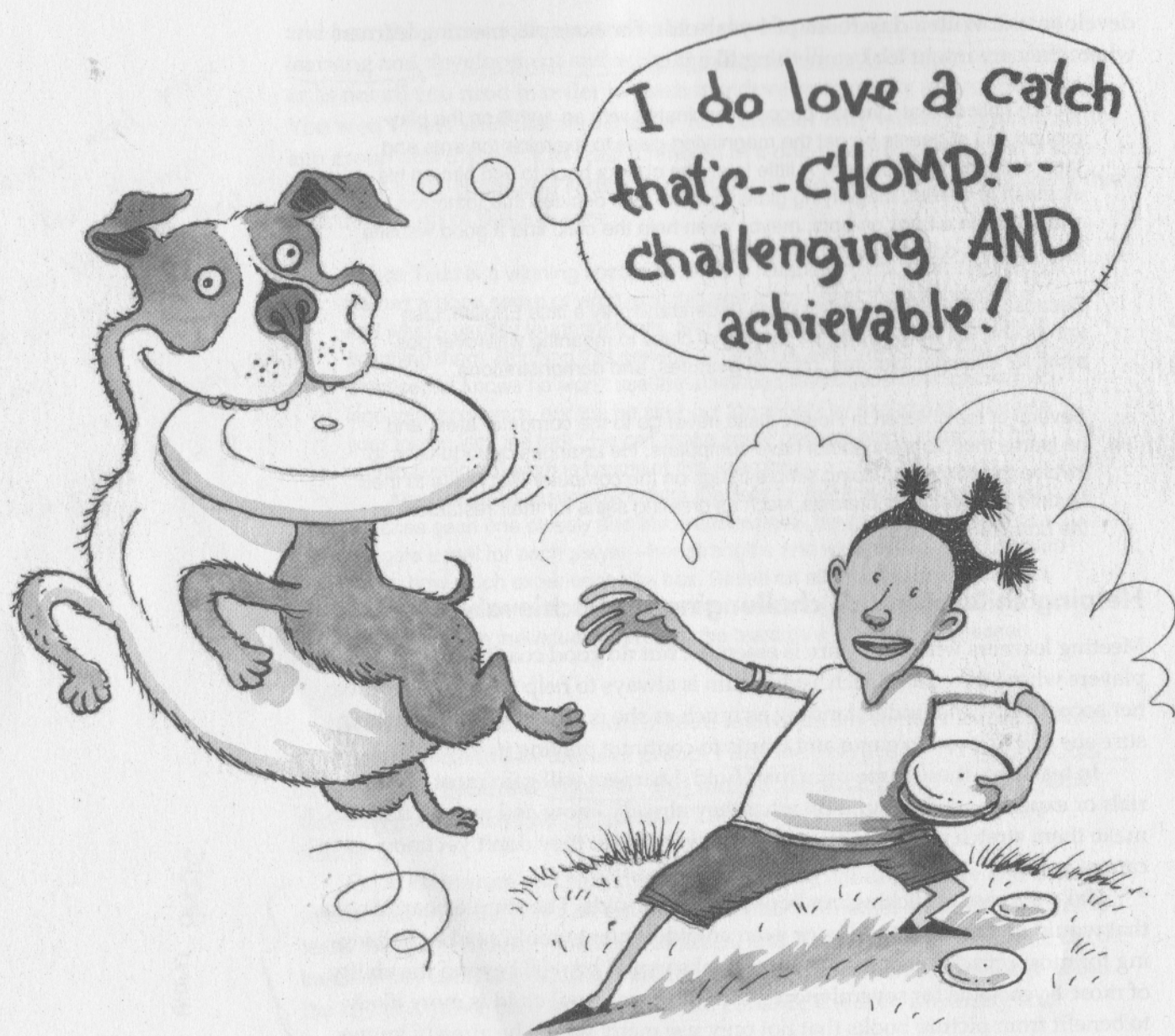
Several of the children in Ross's class never go to the computer area, and he learns their families do not have computers. He arranges opportunities to involve the children in doing simple things on the computer that relate to their favorite activities and interests, such as creating signs for their restaurant in the dramatic play area.

Helping children reach challenging and achievable goals

Meeting learners where they are is essential, but no good coach simply *leaves* his players where they are. Coach Todd's aim is always to help each girl improve her soccer skills and understanding as much as she is able, while also making sure she still enjoys the game and wants to continue playing it.

In teaching, these same principles hold. Learners will gain most from materials or experiences that build on what they already know and can do, but also make them stretch a reasonable amount toward what they don't yet know or cannot yet do.

Take the case of picking out books for 4-year-olds. The simple board books that would be fine for a toddler or even an older infant would not be challenging for most preschoolers, and chapter books would be well beyond the ability of most 4-year-olds for several more years. The preschool child is more likely to benefit from picture books that not only use many words he already knows in familiar ways but also offer a range of new vocabulary, sentence structure, and



expression that he has to work a bit to master. Because such books introduce him to new ideas and experiences, they will propel the child forward and get him ready for more advanced books. Equally important, he will find the just-within-reach books very satisfying and engrossing.

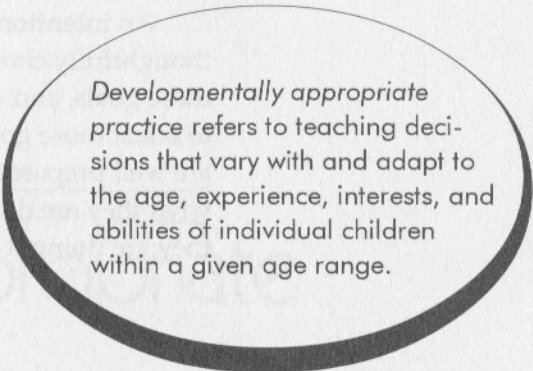
When such a fit exists—that is, when materials or experiences are challenging but not unreasonably beyond the child's ability—we say those materials or experiences are developmentally appropriate for that learner.

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Here are a few generalizations, then, that can be made about developmentally appropriate teaching:

- ◆ Meet learners where they are, taking into account their physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development and characteristics.
- ◆ Identify goals for children that are both challenging and achievable—a stretch, but not an impossible leap.
- ◆ Recognize that what makes something challenging and achievable will vary, depending on the individual learner's development in all areas; her store of experiences, knowledge, and skills; and the context within which the learning opportunity takes place.

A cornerstone of developmentally appropriate teaching is *intentionality*. Teaching that meets learners where they are and that helps them to reach challenging and achievable goals does not happen by chance. In everything good teachers do—from setting up the classroom to assessing children to planning the curriculum—they are intentional. They are purposeful and thoughtful about the actions they take, and they base their actions on the outcomes the program is trying to help children reach. Even in responding to unexpected opportunities—"teachable moments"—the intentional teacher is guided by those outcomes.



Developmentally appropriate practice refers to teaching decisions that vary with and adapt to the age, experience, interests, and abilities of individual children within a given age range.

An intentional teacher has clearly defined learning goals for children, thoughtfully chooses teaching strategies that will enable children to achieve these goals, and continually assesses children's progress and adjusts strategies to reach those goals. Having their goals and plans in mind, intentional teachers are well prepared to tell others—parents, administrators, colleagues—about what they are doing. Not only do they know what to do, they also know why they are doing it and can describe that rationale.

Deciding What Is Developmentally Appropriate

Teachers who are committed to developmentally appropriate practice enact that commitment in the decisions they make about materials, interactions, curriculum, and instruction. To make good decisions they must know a lot about the children in their classroom. Where *are* those children in their learning and development? Individually and as a group? Which goals will be challenging and achievable for them, and which would be an unreasonable stretch?

Three fundamental considerations should guide us in our information gathering and decision making:

1. Consider what is age appropriate—that is, based on what we know about the development and learning of children within a given age range.

Children are not miniature adults. They think and play and feel and see the world in ways that are different from the way that adults do,

Even a week
is a major change
in a child's
development



Think about the difference between a 46-year-old and a 48-year-old. You probably couldn't tell which was which. Not so with children. Now think about the vast difference between a 1- and a 3-year-old, or between a 3- and a 5-year-old. What a difference two years make! For the young, even a month or a week typically brings big changes.

and these ways change as they develop and learn. Age is a significant predictor of a child's characteristics, abilities, and understandings. Knowing about these age-related characteristics, though only a starting point, is vital for early childhood teachers to be effective. (The charts in **A Changing Picture: Children at 3, 4, and 5**, beginning on page 69, summarize the abilities and behaviors common among young children of different ages.)

Teachers who know a lot about children's development are able to make broad predictions about what the children in an age group will be like and what will benefit them. This knowledge enables us to make some preliminary decisions and be fairly confident that our plans will be an appropriate starting point for that group. For example,



Elena has 4- and 5-year-olds in her class, for whom she's planning an art activity. She knows that by age 4, young children's scribbles typically have given way to efforts to graphically represent objects in their environment. She begins planning a discussion about their recent trip to the park to prompt such drawings. Elena also makes a point of providing a range of art materials, because the fine motor skills of most of the younger children within her group will differ from those of the older class members.

So, age matters—it gets us started in gauging what approaches and experiences will be most effective for children in a particular age range. At the same time, good teachers recognize that each individual and group is different. Averages and norms never tell the whole story, do they? There are always significant individual differences, which brings us to the second dimension.

2. Consider what is individually appropriate—that is, attuned to each child in all of his or her individuality.

Effective teachers get to know the individual children in a group and observe them closely. From those observations we can make more specific plans and adjustments to accommodate those children's varying rates of development within and across various developmental areas. Some 4-year-olds in Elena's class, for example, can already do some things more typical of 5-year-olds, and a few of the older children aren't yet doing these things. Moreover, any one child's development will be uneven across different developmental areas.

* Example:

Elena Teacher.

Among the children in Elena's class, Julian is more advanced in his fine motor skills than he is socially or cognitively. Tomás has well-developed language skills but lacks certain fine motor skills such as using scissors or drawing with control.

In addition to their developmental differences, children also differ in many other respects—their likes and dislikes, personalities and learning styles, knowledge and skills based on prior experiences, and more. Responding to each child's individual needs and abilities is fundamental to developmentally appropriate practice and certainly applies to children with special learning needs as well as to more typically developing children. Good teaching can never be the same for all. It always requires us meeting each learner where he or she is and tailoring that learner's goals so they are always challenging and achievable.

As Elena makes plans to help all the children make significant progress in their language development and literacy, she has some overall strategies for the class. Beyond these, she has different plans and strategies in mind for the children who do not know any letters, the five children with only limited English vocabulary, the two who can already write their names and read some words, and so on.

3. Consider what is appropriate to the social and cultural contexts in which children live.

All of us growing up, first as members of our particular family and later as members of a broader social and cultural community, come to certain understandings about what our groups consider appropriate, valued, expected, admired. We learn this through direct teaching from our parents and other important people in our lives and through observing and modeling the behavior of those around us. Among these understandings we learn "rules" about how to show respect, how to interact with people we know well and those we have just met, how to regard time and personal space, how to dress, and countless other behaviors we perform every day. We typically learn the rules very early and very deeply, so we live by them with little conscious thought.

Culture is the socially transmitted behaviors, attitudes, and values shared by a group.

For the young children in our classrooms, what makes sense to them and what they are able to learn and respond to depend on the social and cultural contexts to which they are accustomed. Skilled teachers take such contextual factors into account, along with the children's ages and their purely individual differences, in shaping all aspects of the learning environment.

Young children rarely have had much experience in moving between cultures. Having lived their lives in the familiar confines of home and neighborhood, all children find venturing into the new world of the early childhood setting a very big change. But for those children whose language or social and cultural background differs from that predominating in the class, the situation is more drastic. Too often they find in this new place very little that is familiar and much that is scary and confusing.

It is the teacher's job to take the children's social and cultural experiences into account in planning the daily environment and learning experiences. As Loren Marulis writes about her classroom:

[The goal] is creating an environment that says "everyone is welcome here. . . ." In my classroom, there is not one way of seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, or feeling things. We read books and have artifacts from many cultures, groups of people, lifestyles, and ways of being in the world. We do not study these books and artifacts as thematic units such as "Asian culture week." I use the books and artifacts that represent various cultures throughout my teaching. (2000)

Being responsive to social and cultural differences can be quite a challenge. Our own culture is so integral to who we are, so much a part of our daily experience of the world, that, like breathing, we may not even be aware of it. If ours is the predominant culture or if we are in a position of power, as a teacher is, it can be easy to ignore or devalue cultures different from ours. Even if we are aware of our own culture and respectful of others around us, we still can forget how much harder it is for young children to make the shifts that negotiating different social and cultural contexts requires.

Early childhood teachers have several responsibilities in this regard. First, we must take care not to make judgments about children's behavior without

taking the children's (and our own) social and cultural contexts into account. Let's look at an example.

Although many Europeans and Americans of European descent expect children to make eye contact with them, children from many Latin American and Asian cultures show respect by avoiding the gaze of authority figures. Susan is unfamiliar with this difference in cultural norms, and using her personal cultural lens, she interprets 5-year-old Hoinsu's lack of eye contact as a sign of disrespect, or perhaps inattention, and treats the child accordingly.

Developmentally appropriate shopping

To keep in mind the three kinds of knowledge that should inform our decisions about practice, let's take a developmentally appropriate shopping trip.

Suppose you are shopping for a dress for your 8-year-old goddaughter to wear to a school musical performance. Taking age as a starting point, you'll likely start in the "Girls 7-10" department. You figure that will be the right ballpark—the clothes fitting most girls in the 7 to 10 age range. This dimension is considering **age appropriateness** in decision making.

Now that you're in the right department, will you just pull any size 8 dress off the rack and take it to the register? No, there's more to consider. Let's say your goddaughter is



petite in comparison with her peers. You've seen that she tends to look good in certain styles, and you know she hates pink. These preferences and characteristics will further direct your search. This dimension is considering **individual appropriateness** in decision making.

Finally, you take into account her peer group and family background. Although she may be looking for an outfit her favorite pop idol would wear, you know it wouldn't be appropriate for a school performance. And because you know that the cultural background of your goddaughter's family disposes them to dressing up for such occasions, you steer in that direction in making a choice. Weighing such knowledge is taking account of **social and cultural contexts**.

When a teacher's cultural blinders lead her to draw wrong conclusions, as Susan did, she is unable to provide a developmentally appropriate learning environment for the child.

Further, teachers must be able to forge the cultural bridges that young children need to thrive in the early childhood setting.

From getting to know Kayla's parents and others in her neighborhood, Martin knows that the adults around Kayla do not typically ask a young child like her many questions that they already know the answer to—it's not in their culture. To smooth the child's transition to preschool, the teacher takes care to begin interacting with Kayla in ways she is more familiar with. Over time he will make greater use of questions.

The responsibility for learning about children's social and cultural contexts lies with the teacher. You can become more familiar with the social and cultural contexts of the children in your class in a variety of ways, including talking with families, visiting children's homes, and enlisting the help of community volunteers familiar with children's home cultures. Additional suggestions and detail are provided in various publications in the **Resources** list. (More about working with families comes in part two of this book.)

* * *

To recap, when working with children, an effective teacher begins by thinking about what children of a given age and developmental level are like. This knowledge provides a general idea of the activities, routines, interactions, and curriculum that will be effective with them. But the teacher also has to look at children within the context of their family, community, culture, social group, past experience, and current circumstances, and she must consider each child as an individual. Only then can she make decisions that are developmentally appropriate—that is, age appropriate, individually appropriate, and culturally appropriate.

How Young Children Learn and Develop

Transporting the full set of teaching methods used with college students, middle schoolers, or even third-graders to the early childhood setting would be a dismal failure. But if young children learn best in certain ways, what are these? Young children learn through the following:

Relationships with responsive adults. In the very early years of life, the child's relationships with nurturing, responsive adults are indispensable for her learning (Shonkoff & Phillips 2000). The importance of relationships as the context for learning and development continues in the preschool years. Positive teacher-child relationships promote not only children's social competence and emotional development but also their academic learning (Pianta 2000).

Active, hands-on involvement. In and out of the classroom, young children learn best when they are actively involved. As they play, explore, experiment, and interact with people and objects, children are always trying to make sense of those experiences. Though abstract ideas are not totally beyond them, children under age 7 are most comfortable in the concrete world they see, smell, hear, taste, and touch.

Although hands-on learning opportunities suit preschoolers to a tee, equally important is for activities to be "mind-on," that is, to engage children's

Sammy loves hands on learning... He can't wait to get his **HANDS ON** that cookie dough.



thinking processes and encourage them to investigate, question, and ponder problems.

Meaningful experiences. We all learn best when information and concepts are meaningful to us, that is, connected to what we already know and understand. Although true for people of all ages, this fact about learning is even truer for young children. Children learn best when they can relate new knowledge to what they have already encountered, to what is already important to them. Then they can weave new threads into the fabric of their previous knowledge and experiences. For example, books about babies or new siblings are likely to be of interest to preschoolers, many of whom have younger sisters, brothers, or cousins. And children can visualize and learn about wolves by thinking about the dogs they've been around.

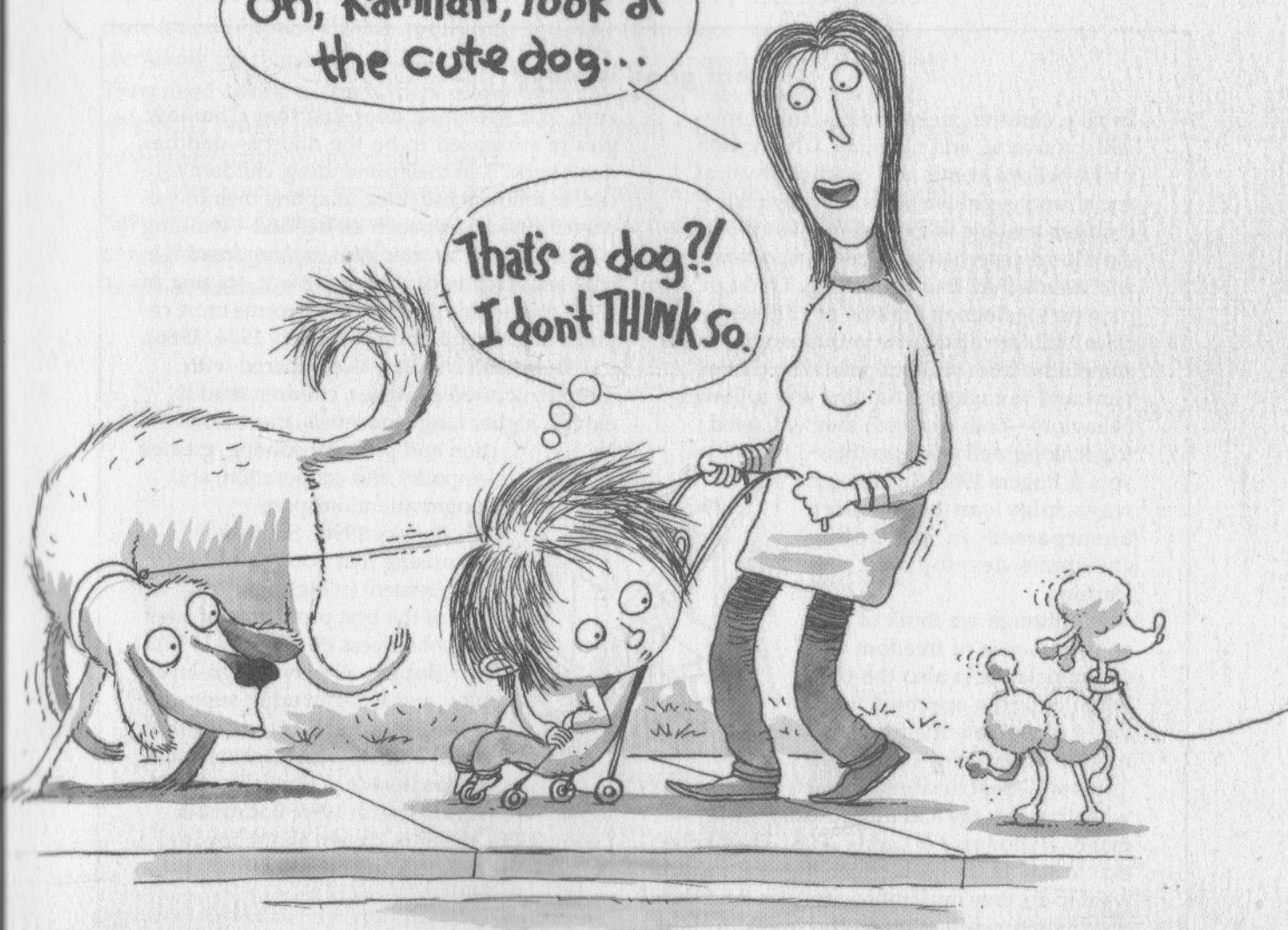
Constructing their understanding of the world. Young children are mentally active learners who are always "constructing" their knowledge or understanding of the world. That is, they are continually working to figure things out on their own terms. Although this is true of adult learners as well, young children have so much to try to make sense of in the world around them.

Even learning what a word refers to, which may sound straightforward, involves the child sorting out what that word does and doesn't include. As children engage in this process of construction, they often come up with ideas that are quite different from what adults *think* they have conveyed.

Marcus, a 2-year-old, on several occasions hears his family members refer to his soft yellow ball with the word *ball* ("Ball, Marcus, here's your ball"). So Marcus learns that this particular object is *ball*. But if he is to generalize the word appropriately to other objects in the world, he has some figuring out to do. Maybe his parents are referring to the bright yellow color, and so any yellow thing is a ball? Or could it be anything you throw? Or is a ball anything of rounded shape, like the kitchen clock? Marcus may reach toward an orange, a balloon, or a round light fixture, saying "Ball!" And the idea that something oblong like a football could also be a ball may never occur to him.

Oh, Kamilah, look at
the cute dog...

That's a dog?!
I don't THINK so.



Eventually, through many, many experiences with *ball*, the child will hone in on a concept that matches the same one adults mean when they use that term. But this does not occur overnight—there is construction to be done.

To illustrate how children construct their understanding of things they see and hear, authors Constance Kamii and Rheta DeVries tell a story about a young girl who believed in Santa Claus but was trying to make sense of her conflicting ideas and observations: “[S]he surprised her mother one day by asking, ‘How come Santa Claus uses our wrapping paper?’ She was satisfied for a few minutes by the explanation supplied by her mother, but then came up with the next question: ‘Then how come Santa has the same handwriting as Daddy?’” (1980, 13).

Children keep putting the bits and pieces together, trying to relate them and make sense of them. This girl had bits of knowledge that seemed to collide. Her questions show she is struggling to fit together the various pieces of information she has in order to make sense of the situation.

As children play, they are actively constructing meaning. For this reason, observing play can be a window into their understandings and concerns. From her work with teachers who closely watch and think about children’s play, educator Deborah Leong (2004) shared this observation:

Four-year-old James sports a man’s jacket and Rosa wears a fancy dress and shoulder purse. They walk around the dramatic play area opening and closing cupboards. James says, “Look here,” as he opens a cupboard. Rosa leans over to look in and nods. Finally the two sit down with a piece of paper. Curious, the teacher asks, “What are you two doing?” James replies, “She’s looking at the place. She’s signing.” Now the teacher makes the connection. The previous weekend, James and his parents had finally moved out of the shelter and into an apartment, much to his delight. Today he is playing the role of a property manager showing an apartment, and Rosa is signing a lease.

Clearly, James has been intently watching and listening to the grownups during this momentous event in his life. Now he has in mind several things that one does when finding a place to live—check it out, sign a paper. Play is a

powerful way that children work through and try to make sense of the happenings and routines in their daily lives, which they don't entirely understand but want very much to process and take control of.

What good is play?

In play, children make choices, solve problems, converse, and negotiate. They create make-believe events and practice physical, social, and cognitive skills. As they play, children are able to express and work out emotional aspects of everyday experiences and events they find disturbing. Through playing together and taking on different roles, children also grow in their ability to see something from another person's point of view and to engage in leading and following behaviors—both of which they will need to get along well as adults (Sawyers & Rogers 1988). In all these ways, play can be a milieu unsurpassed in promoting children's development and learning.

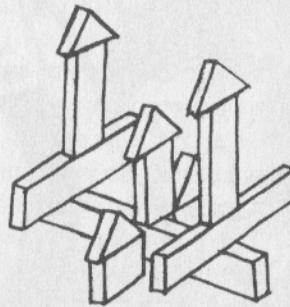
Although we think of play as the essence of freedom and spontaneity, it is also the time when children are most motivated to regulate their own behavior according to certain "musts"—restrictions about what they can say and do because the play demands it (Bodrova & Leong 2003). They know that to stay in the play, which they very much want to do, they must follow its rules. And children monitor each other pretty closely to make

sure that everyone does just that ("Sammy, you're supposed to be the daddy—daddies don't bark!"). In their pretending, children take care to follow these rules, adapting their physical actions and speech as needed—walking heavily to play an elephant, talking in a high, babyish voice to portray an infant, staying in role—and in this process they become more capable of self-regulation (Vygotsky 1934/1986).

In interactive play, as compared with more structured activities, children tend to exhibit higher language levels, more innovation and problem solving, greater empathy and cooperation, and longer attention spans (Smilansky 1990). So it's not surprising that young children's engagement in high-level play is one of the best predictors of later school success (Smilansky 1990).

But not all play is high-level play, and without adult support some children will not reach this level. From expert teachers and researchers (e.g., Jones &

Reynolds 1992; Davidson 1996; Bodrova & Leong 2003), much is known about how to enhance the richness and complexity of children's play.





As important as it is to recognize the active construction children engage in, this does not mean they have no need for adults to convey information and instruction to them. Children certainly don't need to discover or work out *everything* for themselves—how inefficient, indeed impossible, that would be! They need adults to teach them many things. Some of these things are most efficiently taught by direct instruction; others involve a great deal of experience and construction on the child's part.

There are in fact many ways that we can promote children's learning and development. In the course of every day, teachers must draw on a wide range of teaching strategies. We look at some of those strategies later, in the chapter **Teach to Enhance Development and Learning.**