



Developmentally Appropriate Practices

How Children Learn

Kansas Inservice Training System (1996)
Kansas University Center on Developmental Disabilities
2601 Gabriel, Parsons, KS 67357
620-421-6550 ext. 1618 or 1-800-362-0390 ext. 1618
email: kskits@mail.ku.edu
web: kskits.org

How Children Learn: Theoretical Perspectives on Development and Learning

All educators have a belief system, whether explicit or implicit, about how children learn and what they should be learning, which guides and influences their practice. Theories are useful because they help teachers understand why they do what they do and explain why something happens. There are many theories of learning and development that explain various phenomena. Many early childhood professionals have found some theories, such as those developed by Piaget, Vygotsky, and Erikson more comprehensive and explanatory, and therefore more useful, than others. It is these theories that inform this document.

The nature of learning should inform the practice of teaching. Again, the artificial dichotomy between spontaneous, constructed learning and school-related learning is reflected in arguments over child-initiated versus teacher-directed instruction. The fact is that children construct important learning, particularly physical and logical-mathematical knowledge, through child-initiated, spontaneous activity. But, they also learn a great deal from adults. For example, language learning begins in the parent-child relationship, and language is the essential prerequisite for communication. Rather than dichotomizing aspects of learning and/or teaching, the teaching-learning process is better characterized as an *interactive* process. Following is a summary of the basic assumptions about learning and teaching as an interactive process.

- **Children learn best when their physical needs are met and they feel psychologically safe and secure.**

Appropriate curriculum does not violate but rather respects children's biological needs. For example, in appropriate programs children are not required to sit and attend to paperwork or listen to adult lectures for extended periods of time because such activity is at odds with the children's biological needs. Likewise, the curriculum provides for active physical play and periods of more resolute, quiet activity since this pattern is compatible with children's physical needs.

In addition to meeting children's physical needs, adults ensure an environment in which children feel safe, secure and accepted. Children need to know that

school is a safe place where adults will protect and support them and where they can be happy, comfortable, and relaxed. Additionally, when children perceive continuity between their school and home experiences, and a connectedness between the culture of the school and the culture of their family they will feel more psychologically safe in out-of-home environments. When parents are meaningfully involved in the program, the program is more likely to provide an effective learning environment for all children.

- **Children construct knowledge.**

A child's mind is not a miniature model of an adult's, nor is it an empty vessel that gradually fills with information. From infancy, children are mentally and physically active, struggling to make sense of the world. Children are continually acting on and organizing experiences mentally, whether they are social with adults and other children or physical experiences with objects. In short, children construct their own knowledge through repeated experiences involving interaction with people and materials (Piaget, 1952). Knowledge is constructed as a result of dynamic interactions between the individual and the physical and social environments.

- **Children learn through social interaction with adults and other children.**

The healthy development of young children begins in a relationship with another human being, the parent-child relationship being the primary example of social interaction through which very young children develop and learn. Social interaction provides the child opportunity for developing language, and other higher order mental functions, such as conceptualization (Vygotsky, 1978), as well as social competence and self-esteem.

Social interaction calls for reciprocity, mutual respect, and cooperation, that is, the adjustment of individual differences in beliefs, ideas, perspectives, and intentions to create mutually acceptable rules and conventions (Piaget, 1952; Erikson, 1963). All of these capabilities are related to school success and are required of full participants in a democracy.

- **Children's learning reflects a recurring cycle that begins in awareness and moves to exploration, to inquiry, and finally to utilization (Rosegrant, 1989).**

Any new learning by children (or adults) follows a relatively predictable pattern or cycle. To learn anything new, we must first become aware of the phenomenon. Awareness is generated from experience. The next step in the cycle of learning is exploration. To know something, children must first explore it. They must figure out the components of what is being learned, by whatever means possible, usually employing the various senses (seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting). Children must have direct, hands-on experience with the content in order to make it personally meaningful. After exploration comes the stage of inquiry. Inquiry is the process whereby children analyze and compare their own behaviors or concepts to what is observed in society and make closer approximations to the conventional patterns of the culture. The final aspect of the cycle of learning is utilization, when children are able to use what they have learned for multiple purposes and apply their learning to new situations. When children have opportunities to become aware and develop interest, explore and inquire, the learning becomes functional for them; in short, they own it.

- **Children learn through play**

The various kinds of play by young children are effective vehicles for promoting learning. Children's spontaneous play provides opportunities for exploration, experimentation, and manipulation that are essential for constructing knowledge. Play contributes to the development of representational thought. A child expresses and represents his or her ideas, thoughts, and feelings when engaged in symbolic play. During play a child learns to deal with feelings, to interact with others, to resolve conflicts, and to gain a sense of competence. Perhaps most important, it is through play that children develop their imagination and creativity.

Play also provides opportunities for children to practice newly acquired skills or knowledge. This self-initiated practice is part of the process of inquiry; during play, children examine and refine their learning in light of the feedback they receive from the environment and other people. Children are naturally interested

in participating in activities that strengthen their skills and deepen their understanding of concepts.

- **Children’s interests and “need to know” motivate learning.**

Children have an inherent need or “inner push” to exercise their emerging mental abilities and to make sense of their experiences. Activities and curriculum that are based on children’s interests and internal motivation to understand fosters desirable dispositions and feelings, such as initiative, curiosity, attention, self-direction, industry, competence, and love of learning.

- **Human development and learning are characterized by individual variation.**

Each of the forgoing assumptions about learning begins with the word “children,” as though generalizations about children apply equally to all. A wide range of individual variation is normal and to be expected within each of the assumptions presented in this document. Each human being has an individual pattern and timing of growth and development as well as individual styles of learning. Personal family experiences and cultural backgrounds also vary. Recognition that individual variation is not only normal but also valuable requires that decisions about curriculum and assessment be as individualized as possible.

Resources

Bredenkamp, S., & Rosegrant, T. (1992). Reaching potentials through appropriate curriculum: Conceptual frameworks for applying the guidelines. In Bredenkamp, S., & Rosegrant, T. (Eds.). Reaching potentials: Appropriate curriculum and assessment for young children (Vol. I), (pp. 12-17). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children. Adaped with permission.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children & The National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. (1990, November). Guidelines for appropriate curriculum content and assessment in programs serving children ages 3 through 8. In Bredenkamp, S., & Rosegrant, T. (Eds.). Reaching potentials: Appropriate curriculum and assessment for young children (Vol. I), (pp. 9-27). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Things to Think About: Cycle of Learning and Teaching

	WHAT CHILDREN DO	WHAT TEACHERS DO
Awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Experience Acquire an interest Recognize broad parameters Attend Perceive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create the environment Provide opportunities by introducing new objects, events, people Invite interest by posing problem or question Respond to child's interest or shared experience Show interest, enthusiasm
Exploration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Observe Explore materials Collect information Discover Create Figure out components Construct own understanding Apply own rules Create personal meaning Represent own meaning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate Support and enhance exploration Provide opportunities for active exploration Extend play Describe child's activity Ask open-ended questions--"What else could you do?" Respect child's thinking and rule systems Allow for constructive error
Inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine Investigate Propose explanations Focus Compare own thinking with that of others Generalize Relate to prior learning Adjust to conventional rule systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help children refine understanding Guide children, focus attention Ask more focused questions--"What else works like this?" "What happens if...?" Provide information when requested--"How do you spell...?" Help children make connections
Utilization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use the learning in many ways; learning becomes functional Represent learning in various ways Apply learning to new situations Formulate new hypotheses and repeat cycle 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create vehicles for application in real world Help children apply learning to new situations Provide meaningful situations in which to use learning

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