

Explaining Developmentally Appropriate Practice to Families

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What are some simple ways to explain developmentally appropriate practice to parents? For example, parents sometimes ask, “Why aren’t you teaching my kid how to read?”

It can be hard to answer questions from parents who look for evidence of learning in really different ways than preschool teachers who have studied child development. I’ve been asked the same question and, when I was put on the spot, found it difficult to explain the basics of developmentally appropriate practice.

Families are sometimes anxious about their child’s success and achievement in school. They start thinking about which college their child is going to go to and forget that, at the moment, their child is still learning to tie his shoes and wash his hands.

Start by acknowledging that you can understand why parents might be concerned when they don’t see teachers focusing on literacy in the way they expect by, say, tracing letters or memorizing sight words. In this era of academic anxiety, parents are sometimes looking for skills in preschool that usually come later. Then explain that children learn differently before age 8 than they do after age 8, and that preschoolers are at the younger side of even the early learning spectrum.

Share that research from the best universities confirms some of these points:

1. Younger children have different learning processes than older children.
2. Developmentally appropriate practice is about making sure children have fun so that they will learn. Preschoolers can’t learn on demand—they learn because they want to.
3. Teachers take play really seriously. We use play intentionally to ensure each child makes progress toward specific learning goals.
4. Teachers use documentation to show children’s progress (like drawings, photos, or notes comparing what a child did at the beginning of the year to work done later in the year).

Supporting dual language learners

Families of dual language learners sometimes ask, “Why are you including my child’s home language in the school day? Don’t you want her to learn English?” Research shows that supporting children’s home languages helps them learn and supports a strong foundation of prior knowledge. This often helps children learn English and succeed in school. Supporting the languages and cultures that make children unique is an important component of developmentally appropriate practice.

Consider using a response similar to this:

“I know how you feel. When I first started learning about the best ways to teach reading, I was surprised too. I thought we would focus on repeating the alphabet and doing worksheets like I did when I was in school. But research actually shows that the way children learn when they are in preschool and kindergarten is simply different from the way they learn when they’re older. In terms of reading, our most important job right now is to make sure preschoolers love books. We do that by reading them great stories and letting them choose books that they find interesting.

“For example, I’ve noticed your son always picks books about trucks. Have you noticed that he knows how to hold the book so that the print is upright and the cover is facing the front? That’s something he wasn’t doing at the beginning of the year, and that’s a sign of his growing awareness of print. When we think about what your child has already learned, it’s pretty amazing. He likes to spend time in our reading corner and he told me his mom got a book about a llama that made him feel better when he was sad. So you can tell he’s listening intently and understanding the content of books. He’s also making gains in his writing skills. For example, have you seen this picture he drew?”

“Look at his efforts to write his name. The fact that he’s already writing some of the letters in his name indicates that he has made the connection that letters represent sounds and meaning. You can start pointing out simple signs you see around you, like a stop sign, to deepen that connection for him.

“I know the way we teach reading and writing is different from what you expected and what we did as kids, but your child is on track to be a successful reader. There’s no rush; give him time to enjoy what he’s learning—which is actually a lot and right on schedule—and you will be pleased to see him love reading on his own in a year or two. Our most important job right now is to keep reading and learning about reading fun so that your child can make progress every day. That’s developmentally appropriate practice.”

Then you can invite the family to come in and read a story to the class the next morning! **TYC**