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Addressing Preschool Standards in Developmentally Appropriate Ways

The early years of life form the foundation for all later learning and development. Rich experiences with engaging materials and caring adults during the preschool years lay the foundation for children to develop a lifelong love of learning and a positive sense of self-worth. Research has confirmed that experiences children have during the first years of life help to form vital connections in the brain that establish the framework for future learning. As children play, investigate their world, and participate in language-rich environments with supportive adults, they build these connections and grow in all areas of development.

Teachers, caregivers, and parents often wonder how best to help their children, what kinds of skills they should be learning, and how they can assist their children in attaining these skills. Preschool content standards provide direction by outlining goals most children can achieve during these early years.

Defining the Standards

Preschool content standards describe appropriate skills, knowledge, and understanding children can attain with support by the time they have finished their preschool years. There are different terms used to describe standards, but generally accepted definitions are provided below.

Standards are general statements that represent the information and/or skills that children should know and be able to do. Each standard area contains benchmarks that are subcomponents of standards that describe more concretely what children should know and be able to do at specific developmental levels (Bodrova, Leong, Paynter, & Semenov, 2000). For example, a standard for the Social/Emotional Area might be "Children demonstrate a positive self-concept and self-confidence in play and everyday tasks." A more specific benchmark under that standard could be "Children adjust to new situations."

In this book, the benchmarks that are provided describe children's performance at the end of their preschool years.

Each state has created its own unique preschool standards and refers to them by various names, including the following:

- Early Learning Guidelines
- Early Learning Standards
- Indicators
- Desired Results
- Early Learning and Development Benchmarks
- Preschool Teaching and Learning Expectations

Target ages for the standards vary somewhat, but they are generally designed for children 3 to 5 years of age. Ideally, preschool teachers, family home- and center-based child care providers, Head Start staff, administrators, early childhood special educators, parents, and all who work with preschool-aged children can use these standards.

The federal initiative Good Start, Grow Smart (2002) asked states to develop voluntary early learning guidelines in the areas of language and literacy, as well as mathematics that align with the state standards for kindergarten. This alignment ensures a continuum of learning experiences from preschool to kindergarten and the elementary grades. States have included other curricular areas as well to address the needs of the whole child. These early learning guidelines are available from the Department of Education in most states, as well as on the Internet, including the National Childcare Information Center Web site at http://www.nccic.org/pubs/goodstart/elgwebsites.html.

Preschool standards can guide our work with children and outline what most children will be able to know and do by the end of their preschool years. However, they should not be used as a means of keeping children from entering kindergarten. As educators, our emphasis should be on helping children achieve success in preschool and kindergarten; preschool standards can help us to do that. They describe skills and understandings that children can develop in a supportive environment during their preschool years that will help them start kindergarten ready to succeed. Three-year-old children are just beginning to make progress toward reaching most of the benchmarks. With the guidance of caring adults, they will continue to make progress throughout their preschool years.

Meeting the Needs of All Children

Although skills outlined in preschool standards are written to be achievable for most children by the end of their preschool years, each child is unique. Children develop at individual rates and have individual needs and characteristics. Within a group of typically developing children, there will be significant differences in their rates of development. Our goal should be that all children have opportunities to achieve their full potential, even though some of them won't reach all of the standards.

Children also come to us speaking a variety of languages. We can support children by encouraging the use of their first language while introducing the new language. The child's first language serves as the foundation for the acquisition of other languages. Throughout this book we will use the term *bilingual learners* to refer to children who are learning English as a new language, as well as children who know English and are learning their families' native languages. This term is also used to emphasize the importance of children retaining their home language as they learn the new language. More discussion on helping children learn a new language can be found in Chapter 6 and at the end of Chapters 3 through 9.

Addressing Standards Through Engaging Experiences and Activities

Designing curriculum is an ongoing process that involves understanding our children and their needs. Curriculum can be defined as "the content (knowledge, skills, and dispositions) to be taught and the plans for experiences through which learning will take place" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006, p. 59). Early learning guidelines outline the content preschool children can learn.

Our challenge is making certain we are helping children reach these guidelines in developmentally appropriate ways.

What Research and the Experts Tell Us

Developmentally Appropriate Practice

"Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) means teaching young children in ways that meet children where they are, as individuals and as a group; and helping each child reach challenging and achievable goals that contribute to his or her ongoing development and learning" (Copple & Bredekamp, 2006, p. 3). Adults make decisions about their work with children based on knowledge of child development (age appropriate), each individual child (individually appropriate), and the social and cultural contexts of the children (socially and culturally appropriate). DAP also requires that adults teach intentionally, purposefully planning curriculum and assessment with each child in mind. In developmentally appropriate programs, there is an awareness that children learn through relationships with responsive adults; active, hands-on involvement; meaningful experiences; and constructing their understandings of the world. Adults plan experiences and work side by side with children, helping them make sense of their world (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Copple & Bredekamp, 2006).

Learning and Play

Research has shown that children learn best through play. We need to encourage children to ask questions, explore, and discover through play and rich experiences with engaging materials. If we want children to truly learn and understand concepts, we should provide hands-on experiences that allow them to see how things work and help them to construct knowledge about the concepts:

- Children learn science concepts as they play at the water table and watch caterpillars turn into butterflies.
- They learn math as they build with blocks of various sizes and sort and classify toy dinosaurs.
- Literacy blossoms as children listen to stories and then retell the stories with puppets. It continues to grow as they sign their names to pictures they have drawn and make cards for their friends.
- Social skills develop as they play in the Dramatic Play Area, trying out adult roles, preparing pretend meals for each other, and learning to share materials.
- Motor skills develop as they run and play outside, ride tricycles, string beads, play with toy cars, and create with play dough.

What Research and the Experts Tell Us

Play

For many years, theorists have written about the importance of play for children's learning and development. Piaget (1952) believed that children learn best through play and their interactions with the environment. Bruner (1972) described play as the way children learn to solve problems that will later enable them to work through problems as an adult. According to Vygotsky, play "is the preeminent educational activity of early childhood" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 57). Vygotsky (1978) believed play allows children to move forward in their development. "Play creates a zone of proximal development in the child. In play, the child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he was a head taller than himself" (p. 102). Brain research has also confirmed the importance of play and exploration to brain development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Shore, 1997).

The Project Approach

An effective way to help children learn is to use the Project Approach (Chard, 1998; Katz & Chard, 2000). In the Project Approach, children engage in an in-depth study of a topic. Adults observe children's interests, enthusiasm, and questions over time. After thoughtful discussions with the children, together they choose a project topic to investigate. The topic should be something worthy of an extended study and full of potential for children's exploration. There should also be enough materials, books, resource people, and possible field sites to visit. Another consideration before choosing a topic would be to ensure that standards could be met through the project, although most worthwhile topics will enable children to meet a whole host of standards. Children learn literacy, mathematics, science, social studies, the arts, social, emotional, and motor skills in the context of working on the project. The project could last for several weeks or longer, depending on the children's interest and resources available. The preschools in Reggio Emilia, Italy, which have been ranked as some of the best early childhood programs in the world, engage children in long-term projects (Edwards, Forman, & Gandini, 1998).

Phases of the Project Approach

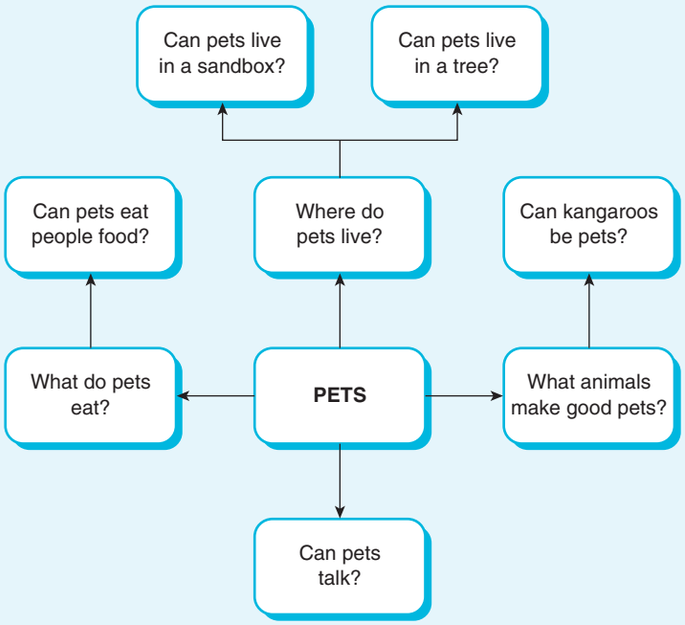
Phase 1: Beginning the Project

Opening event, material, or story to spark additional interest

Brainstorming with the children possible areas to investigate in the project

Developing a web, including areas related to the topic that children wish to learn more about

Developing questions with the children that they would like to explore



Phase 2: Investigation and Representation: Doing the Actual Work of the Project

Planning and participating in field visits

Inviting experts and visitors to share information on the topic

Reading, investigating, and gathering information

Playing in interest areas

Taking photographs

Drawing and dictating information they have learned

Documenting children's learning and progress

Phase 3: Concluding the Project

Completing documentation of the project

Culminating event to share the work of the project with others

Reflecting on what was learned through the project

Choosing a new topic or direction for the next project

A project might develop as you notice children talking about their pets. A conversation between Ella and James went something like this:

James: I have dogs.

Ella: I have two dogs, Kamey and Coco. Kamey is *so* black.

James: Um, I love to throw the tennis ball, and I love it when they win.

Ella: I play with them—give them kisses.

James: I love to feed them, and love it when they watch me paint with water.

You may also notice the children painting pictures of cats and dogs and choosing books related to pets in the Library Area. Children may be asking to bring their pets from home to show their friends and are especially interested in a neighborhood dog that wanders by each day. The following chart shows how you might proceed through the different phases of the project, depending on the children's interests. The plan would evolve as the project progresses, based on the children's questions, interests, and ideas.

A Project on Pets

Phase 1

- Introduce a real puppy and read a book, such as *Franklin Wants a Pet,* as an opening event.
- Make a topic web with the children by brainstorming all the possible topics that could be included in a project on pets.
- As children dictate, list on large chart paper what they already know about the topic as well as questions they would like to investigate.

Phase 2

- Invite parents to bring in family pets or pictures of their pets, and ask children to share how they care for them.
- Invite a veterinarian, parent, or someone knowledgeable about pets in to talk with the group, and plan a trip to a local pet store if this is an option.
- Take walks to observe animals and pets in the neighborhood, and encourage parents to walk with their children as well.
- Read books about pets to individuals and small groups. Add books to the Library Area and books on tape to the Listening Area that deal with pets.
- Set up the Dramatic Play Area as a veterinarian's office or a pet store, so children can further explore the new information they are learning.
- Introduce a new pet to the classroom, such as a fish or guinea pig. Have children investigate the kind of environment, food, and care the pet would need. Weigh and measure the pet weekly, and chart this information on a graph.
- Revisit the topic web and list of questions frequently.

- Provide materials for children to create imaginary pets from play dough, clay, and other creative art materials. Help them to name their pets and dictate stories about them.
- Encourage children to represent other information they have learned with additional drawings and creations.

Phase 3

Conclude the project with the children by helping them decide how to demonstrate and share what they have learned. This could include setting up a small pet store with their new creations and stories. Children could help make signs and invitations for parents to come in to listen to stories the children dictated and see all that they have accomplished.

Science and social studies themes have the potential of offering meaningful, interesting project topics for exploration. Looking over preschool standards and benchmarks in these areas may provide inspiration for quality topics to investigate. As children explore science and social studies ideas, they will not only learn the science and social studies concepts, but they will be learning in all other areas of the curriculum as well.

There are many effective ways to help children learn skills and concepts in addition to the Project Approach. It is important that adults working with preschool children be knowledgeable about standards and developmental milestones appropriate for their children. By keeping these in mind, they can intentionally plan activities and experiences that will address these standards and milestones.

Assessing Progress Toward Meeting the Standards

Documenting children's progress toward achieving standards and benchmarks should be done in ways that are developmentally appropriate for preschool-aged children (McAfee, Leong, & Bodrova, 2004). Assessing children helps us find each child's *zone of proximal development,* which Vygotsky (1978) believed is where all real learning occurs. This zone is the distance between what a child is capable of doing independently and what he or she can do with assistance (Bodrova & Leong, 1996). When we know what children can do on their own, we can use preschool standards to help us determine what additional skills we can work on to help them progress in their development.

Observing and Recording

Observation tools, checklists, and anecdotal records can help us determine the zone of proximal development for each child. You can make an observation tool by using a list of your state standards. This tool could be designed to keep track of the whole group by listing specific benchmarks down the side and the children's names across the top in a grid. This information can then be transferred to separate forms for individual children, to show their growth throughout the year. The Resources section at the back of this book contains sample observation tools that can be adapted, using your own state standards.

While observation tools and checklists are helpful, we should not assume that addressing a standard one time is sufficient. A single project or activity is not enough. We need to intentionally plan multiple opportunities for children to grow in their skill, knowledge, and understanding and assess their growth over time.

Observations and assessment of children should be made and recorded while children are engaged in play and daily activities. Children often demonstrate their growing understandings as they try out roles in the Dramatic Play Area, create artwork, build, and tell stories. Standardized paper-and-pencil tests are not appropriate assessment measures for preschool children.

Portfolios

Children's growth can also be documented through collections of their work in portfolios. These portfolios could include drawings, samples of children's writing and other work, photographs, and even audio and/or videotape recordings. Asking children to take part in choosing which pieces of their work to include in their portfolios to show their growth will help children think about what they have learned and help them be more aware of the learning process. Benchmarks addressed by items in the portfolio could be written on the back of the work samples.

Other Developmentally Appropriate Assessments

There are several developmentally appropriate, systematic assessment tools designed to help assess children's progress. These include the Creative Curriculum Developmental Continuum Assessment System, the Preschool Child Observation Record from High/Scope, and The Work Sampling System (see the "References and Further Reading" section for more information on these resources).

In the Project Approach, teachers often make documentation panels that document the work of the project over time. The panels can include children's drawing, writing, and photographs of the children at work (Helm, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 1998). Children's assessments and progress should be shared with families so they can support children's growth as well.

Summary

Early learning guidelines or preschool standards can help guide our work with children. They outline skills, knowledge, and understanding that most children can attain during their preschool years with the support of caring adults. Children learn these best through play and engaging hands-on activities. An effective way to help children reach early learning guidelines is through the Project Approach, which engages children in an in-depth study of a topic of interest. Assessing children's progress can inform our work with children by showing us what they are able to do and where they still need assistance. Assessment should be carried out in developmentally appropriate ways, while children are engaged in play, through observations, checklists, and documentation.