



Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Kindergarten

Observation Guide

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Kindergarten can provide a sturdy bridge between early childhood and elementary educational experiences. During this time, it is critical for adults to meet children where they are developmentally through developmentally appropriate practice. Young children learn best through engaging in hands-on, play-based activities in socially and emotionally supportive environments aligned with their developmental stages (Zosh et al., 2017). Meeting children where they are developmentally means taking an individualized and culturally responsive approach to helping each child reach achievable goals based on their unique developmental needs while building on strengths through play-based instruction. Developmentally appropriate practice promotes each child's development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based approach grounded in a deep understanding of child development (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

This observation guide is designed to help state leaders, school administrators, and teaching staff reflect upon developmentally appropriate practices in kindergarten classrooms. This guide can assist observers in identifying areas of strength of kindergarten programs and resources needed to support teachers, schools, and districts in ensuring equitable, developmentally appropriate experiences for all kindergartners.

In a developmentally appropriate kindergarten classroom, examples of developmentally appropriate practice will be evident within the following areas:

- safe and supportive environments
- responsive developmental relationships
- family engagement
- curriculum and instruction
- motor development
- literacy and language development

Use the guidance in the following sections to observe for and identify evidence of developmentally appropriate practice, areas of strength, and resources needed to fully realize developmentally appropriate practice throughout the kindergarten experience. These observations may come from a combination of kindergarten classroom visits, interviews with kindergarten educators, and reviews of written materials.



Safe and Supportive Environments

The classroom environment is key in setting the stage for developmentally appropriate practice in kindergarten. Establishing a physical learning environment and a structure to the day that is responsive to children's needs has a powerful impact on how children learn (Copple et al., 2014). A developmentally appropriate classroom is inviting and friendly without being overwhelming. The classroom is physically, academically, and emotionally safe and provides children with various opportunities for group and individual experiences. A developmentally appropriate kindergarten environment may include the following:

- clear pathways for children to travel with clearly defined areas
- muted colors (nonstimulating) throughout the classroom and minimal distractions, such as artwork hanging from the ceiling
- indications that children's work is valued and respected, such as orderly display of their work throughout the classroom
- ample child-sized furniture available
- variety of spaces, including soft and hard surfaces, for children to engage in a variety of learning opportunities, including collaborative play and independent learning
- clearly defined learning centers
- space for each child to store personal belongings and materials
- quiet spaces within the classroom for individual children to have time away from large groups
- materials and toys that authentically reflect the diversity of the student population
- children and families represented in photos and activities throughout the classroom
- accessible child-sized bathrooms within the kindergarten classroom
- a flexible yet predictable schedule each day
- low teacher-to-child ratios (1:12 maximum)

Use the space below to document your observations, being sure to include evidence of practices, areas of strength, and resources needed.

Responsive Developmental Relationships

Responsive relationships are key to the social–emotional development of young children (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). Teachers have many opportunities to interact with children in responsive ways. In a kindergarten classroom, developmentally appropriate practice may include the following:

- Teachers scaffold children’s social–emotional development by encouraging them through specific positive feedback, modeling, and assistance as needed.
- Teachers are familiar with each child and their needs, preferences, customs, and so on; teachers’ approaches are individualized to meet those needs.
- Children are encouraged to communicate with their peers and adults and have opportunities to observe positive communication through role modeling.
- Children are given opportunities to express themselves and all emotions throughout the day and to observe positive role modeling.
- Teachers use positive feedback more frequently than negative feedback.
- Teachers build community among the children through having group discussions and class meetings, developing class guidelines together and modeling those guidelines, providing opportunities for cooperative play, and encouraging children and families to share about their families and cultures.
- Teachers respect the cultural and family contexts and related social–emotional development and relationships of children in the class; children are not forced to look teachers in the eye; parents and caregivers are able to care for their children; there is a balance of independence and interdependence within the classroom, reflecting cultural values.

Use the space below to document your observations, being sure to include evidence of practices, areas of strength, and resources needed.



Family Engagement

Research shows that children whose families are engaged and included in the school experience are more likely to be successful in school and later in life (American Psychological Association, 2014; Mapp & Bergman, 2021). In a developmentally appropriate kindergarten, family engagement is intentional and inclusive of all families. It may include the following:

- Parents and caregivers are seen as a child's first teachers as observed in parent communication, conferences, and day-to-day interactions.
- Children and families (if applicable) are greeted warmly each day; for families not on site, there is a system in place to ensure families feel welcomed.
- Children and families in class are represented in photos and activities throughout the classroom.
- Family members are invited into the classroom at drop-off, pickup, or other times of the day throughout the year.
- Teachers provide progress reports, positive notes, home-based learning activities, and newsletters regularly in applicable language(s).
- Parents are provided with multiple ways to communicate with the teacher (in person, by phone, by email, and so on).
- Qualified interpreters are available to communicate with families; children are not expected to be interpreters for adults.

Use the space below to document your observations, being sure to include evidence of practices, areas of strength, and resources needed.

Curriculum and Instruction

A developmentally appropriate curriculum is one that supports young children in their development and learning through play and exploration. Social–emotional well-being is the cornerstone of learning (Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center, 2022; Jones & Kahn, 2017; Mapp & Bergman, 2021; Silverman, 2019). In a kindergarten classroom, developmentally appropriate practice may include the following:

- a differentiated curriculum that reflects flexibility within a predictable structure
- children engaged in a variety of activities supportive of all areas of development
- teachers acting as facilitators of learning rather than as lecturers
- instruction that takes place through a variety of play-based activity types, including whole group, small group, learning centers, and individual activities
- opportunities for children to play freely with open-ended materials throughout the day
- curriculum standards that are met through hands-on, project-based activities
- children engaged in hands-on, play-based activities more frequently than in worksheets, rote tasks, or other similar activities
- teachers refraining from providing samples of art or other similar lessons and instead allowing children to express themselves freely
- children receiving positive feedback and gentle guidance rather than corrections
- assessments conducted through hands-on, play-based observations or, if necessary, in short one-on-one activities rather than long periods of assessment
- technology used as an interactive complement to hands-on learning and play, including through interactions with peers and adults and by meeting the needs of all children through universal design for learning principles (Lee, 2016)

Use the space below to document your observations, being sure to include evidence of practices, areas of strength, and resources needed.



Motor Development

Fine and gross motor skills developed in early childhood build the foundation for skills needed later in life, such as writing, self-care, and other fundamental motor skills (Hudson & Willoughby, 2021). Children engaged in ample gross motor activities tend to be more successful in school and have stronger executive functioning skills in comparison to those children without gross motor opportunities. In a kindergarten classroom, developmentally appropriate practice may include the following:

- ample opportunities for children to move throughout the day, including during instruction; children having at least 60 minutes of active, unstructured playtime during a full day of kindergarten with slightly less time for a shorter class period; recess or playtime not restricted as a consequence for misbehavior or rule breaking
- access throughout the day to materials for developmentally appropriate activities that support fine and gross motor development, such as working with play dough, building materials, and child-sized writing tools and playing outdoors with appropriate equipment, such as swings, climbing structures, balls, tricycles, and so on
- ample space provided and ability to sit on the floor, including alternate sitting or standing throughout the day in ways that are most comfortable to children; no requirement to sit in a particular way (e.g., crisscross applesauce)

Use the space below to document your observations, being sure to include evidence of practices, areas of strength, and resources needed.

Literacy and Language Development

Children develop literacy and language skills most successfully through relationship-based interactions with adults and peers and through the written and spoken word (Early Learning Network, n.d.; Ostrosky et al., 2006; ZERO TO THREE, 2016). In a kindergarten classroom, developmentally appropriate practice may include the following:

- Children are encouraged to engage with books and other written materials in their home language(s) during free play.
- Children are exposed to open-ended literacy materials and activities more frequently than closed-ended activities.
- Children are provided ample opportunities for imaginative play and storytelling.
- Teachers share and read books and written materials in children's home language(s) with children every day.
- The classroom is a print-rich environment including furniture, materials, and photos that are labeled in home languages.
- Children engage in conversations with teachers and peers throughout the day in their home language(s).
- Teachers model grammar, syntax, and language skills without correcting children.
- Home languages are valued and integrated in a genuine manner. Home languages are represented in translated materials. Children are encouraged to speak their home languages.

Use the space below to document your observations, being sure to include evidence of practices, areas of strength, and resources needed.



Final Reflection

At the conclusion of your observation visit, you may consider the following questions:

What were the strengths and assets of the classrooms you visited?

Be specific about what you noticed as evidence of each strength or asset.

What were the needs or opportunities of the classrooms you visited?

Be specific about what you noticed as evidence of each need or opportunity.

At a system level, how might you or your team promote the strengths or support the needs you saw? The strategies you consider will depend on your role within the education system. Check all that apply:

- Funding
- Professional learning opportunities, such as workshops or communities of practice
- Policy changes
- Other (please specify) _____

Who else might you engage with for carrying out this work?

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