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## **Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

There are times when we, as teachers are interacting or teaching the children that you, as parents may not understand what we are up to. The term "developmentally appropriate" is the key to translating what you see into sensible terms. At its essence, a developmentally appropriate program teaches, guides, interacts, stimulates, and offers to the child the materials, activities, and opportunities that are appropriate to his/her developmental level. Each child develops in an orderly fashion- he/she coos before he/she babbles, he/she babbles before he/she makes purposeful sounds that are not recognizable as language, he/she next uses single words that you can understand, next comes two word and three word sentences, and so forth. Each stage is the foundation for succeeding stages. A child cannot skip stages. And, you cannot accelerate a child through the stages.

If you try to force a child to his/her next stage before he/she is ready, a ton of potential problems arise. First, the child will continue to try to go back to that stage since he/she is not yet finished with the experiences of the stage nor, has he/she had his/her developmental needs fully met. For example, the two year old children here at Saybrook love to play in the water. Developmentally, two year old children are still very sensory oriented. It is appropriate for them to want to play in the water, and they need to play in the water. You will notice that they will compulsively seek to satisfy this need no matter how strict you are about not letting them do it- they'll continually end up playing in the sink, with the hose, or even in the toilet! They are not defying you. On the contrary, as much as they like to please you, they are compelled developmentally to get back into that water.

So, how do you help them progress out of the stage? You make sure he/she has plenty of opportunities to do water play; you help him/her get satiated! We have noticed here that when we remember to set up the water play early in the morning and make sure the water babies get good long chances to play in the water, that they do not play in the bathroom or with water otherwise very much during the day. They are satisfied for the day. With many of the older kids, who often have had plenty of opportunity to do water play previously, the water play opportunities in the early morning are not as attractive. They have moved beyond that stage and/or were satiated- they got their fill when they were younger.

On the other hand, the older ones who still continually get into the water probably were blocked from getting their fill when they were younger. And, there is a good possibility that while they were blocked from their developmentally appropriate water play that they may have gotten a fair amount of negative feedback about their "not quitting that messy water play": "I told you to stop! What are you doing? Can't you remember? Why do you keep doing this to me? Look at the mess you made!" This is why understanding what is developmentally appropriate at different stages is so important. Adults sometimes end up scolding or being upset with children for being....children! That is, for doing what children both are supposed to be doing and need to do. This is a great danger from not understanding developmentally appropriate stages- that children be scolded or rebuffed or punished for being children. The children's self-esteem can be badly damaged by our



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demanding behavior beyond their capacity of their developmental stages.

At home and in schools, we usually have three kinds of learning times: free time, semi-structured time, and directed structured time. Each has their own value for the children. Directed structured time is the more traditional time where a teacher takes a group of children and leads and directs them in activities and projects. Some things are best learned in a teacher-directed situation. Free time is time when the choices are largely unlimited. For the most part, the children chose and do what they want. The semi-structured time is a combination of these times, and is often the most misunderstood. For the older kids, this is center time. For the younger kids, this is most of their group times.

When the older (4 and up) children are doing center time (moving from activity center to activity center freely during the 9-10 o'clock group time) sometimes it looks like there is no "teaching" going on. The younger children are even often wandering around from activity to activity during their group times as well. In the traditional sense of a teacher telling children facts or leading an activity, no there is no "teaching" going on. However, there is a lot of learning going on. The primary way that children learn is through two simple processes: Exploration and Experimentation. Exploration is the examining of a thing or an activity- finding out what it is all about. For example, a block is hard (ouch! it hurt when I bumped my head with it), has corners, is smooth, that I can pick up with one hand, is shorter or taller depending on how I place it on the floor, and so forth. Experimentation is testing out what one can do with a thing or activity- can I make a tall stack of them?, can I make a wall or a road? can I get them to fall? or stay up? can I make a house? a bridge? how many small ones can I put on one longer one?, and so forth.

By creating and supplying a rich environment with lots of different and interesting collections of things, the teacher sets up a learning environment where the child learns naturally through his/her natural instincts to explore and experiment. Rather than having to lead the learning/teaching which requires a focus on the group, the teacher is able to allow the members of the group to find their own interest areas. The teacher is, as a result, freed to focus on the individual and his/her interactions with the toys and other children. The "teaching" is on more of a personal level rather than through directing the group process. If the individuals are doing well in their exploration and experimentation- that is "learning", the teacher does not need to "teach", in a sense. The teacher in these moments of active child initiated learning may look like she/he is doing nothing, and the children look like they are "just" playing around. On the contrary, a very special learning environment is in full swing. And, one that is developmentally appropriate.

### **Biography**

Ronald Mah, therapist and educator, combines concepts, principles, and philosophy with practical techniques and guidelines for effective and productive results. He uses humor and stories from his many experiences to illustrate important points in a stimulating and highly motivating and engaging style.



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A Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, his experiences include: Asian-American community mental health, Severely Emotionally Disturbed mental health & school partnership programs, vocational programs for at risk youth, welfare to work programs, clinical consulting & cross and multi-cultural training for Head Start, other early childhood education programs, social services organizations, & mental health agencies, supervising a high school mental health clinic, training and supervising therapists, private practice in Castro Valley, author of the Asian Pacific Islander Parent Education Support curriculum.

Professional Education experiences include: 16 years in ECE, including owning and running a child development center for 11 years, Kindergarten, elementary, & secondary teaching credentials and experience, ethnic studies curriculum writer, community college instructor, Masters of Psychology instructor, and former member Board of Directors of the California Kindergarten Association and of the California Association of Marriage & Family Therapists.