

Creating a Caring, Equitable Community of Learners



RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE DAP POSITION STATEMENT

Developmentally appropriate practice takes place within a community of learners: a group of young children linked in relationships with one another and with one or more teachers, learning and developing together in partnerships with families. Children learn and develop best when all participants in a community consider and contribute to one another's well-being and learning and are valued for the strengths they bring.

Alaia arrives at her classroom door on her first day of kindergarten both excited and a little nervous. Although she already met her teacher, Mrs. Fraser, a few weeks before during a home visit, Alaia is reassured when she sees Mrs. Fraser's smiling face at the door. Mrs. Fraser walks Alaia to her cubby, helping her unload and hang up her backpack. Alaia is excited to see her name and photo on the cubby, letting her know this is her own special space. Alaia remembers she brought a photo of her family, as Mrs. Fraser had asked her to do during her home visit. Mrs. Fraser helps her add it to a shelf with the photos of the other children's families. Mrs. Fraser invites Alaia to choose an activity to do as the other children arrive. Alaia joins Holden at the Lego table, and as they build Mrs. Fraser hears Holden compliment Alaia's structure. After all the children arrive, Mrs. Fraser asks them to join her on the carpet to greet each other. Then they sing songs, dance, and read the book *All Are Welcome*, by Alexandra Penfold, which follows children through a school day and repeats the message that no matter their race, family makeup, clothes, religion, or ability, everyone belongs here. The children in Mrs. Fraser's kindergarten class, too, feel welcomed and cared for as they see themselves reflected throughout the room. The teacher intentionally chose the greeting activity and this particular book

to read as a way to begin to lay the groundwork for Alaia, Holden, and their peers to feel that they are a part of this new community and that they all belong.

Community is the foundation for learning. When planning for building a community of kindergartners that supports children's development and learning, teachers consider two important characteristics: caring relationships and equity. All significant learning occurs within the context of positive and supportive relationships. In early childhood classrooms, equity is "the practice of consistently viewing each child as an individual and customizing one's treatment of them to increase access and remove barriers to classroom resources" (NAEYC 2022, 112). Effective teachers ensure that young children feel a sense of belonging and feel valued for who they are and what they bring. In the vignette above, the educator actively developed a caring and equitable community of learners through her interactions with children and families, her selection of classroom materials, and her attention to children's ideas and feelings.

A caring community such as this provides a foundation for children's future experiences and attitudes about school and learning. Early positive relationships predict a wide array of later positive outcomes, including social skills, success in relationships, and enhancements in cognitive skills such as thinking and reasoning (Center on the Developing Child 2004). To build and maintain these relationships while supporting children's growing independence and their ability to become responsible members of the community, effective teachers consistently and purposefully do the following:

- › Create a welcoming environment for young children and families that represents and reflects the diverse backgrounds, experiences, and cultures within the community of learners
- › Engage in authentic conversations with children
- › Work to build a strong sense of group identity
- › Observe, identify, and build on children's strengths
- › Use culturally responsive teaching practices

- › Learn about and incorporate children’s interests into learning experiences
- › Provide meaningful opportunities for children to practice regulating their own bodies, feelings, and actions
- › Allocate time for children to become deeply engaged in meaningful exploration (NAEYC 2022)
- › Provide opportunities for children to take responsibility for the care of the classroom and support each other

When children feel safe, valued, and seen within their kindergarten community of learners, meaningful learning occurs—great things are possible!

READ AND REFLECT

As you read the chapters in this section, consider and evaluate your own classroom practices using these reflection questions.

“Successful Transitions into and out of Kindergarten: Supporting Children and Families” highlights challenges and opportunities for making the transitions to and from kindergarten more seamless and successful for children and families. Focusing on collaboration at the classroom and wider system levels, the chapter offers strategies that build on children’s experiences to ensure a successful kindergarten year. **Consider:** What challenges do you see when children begin kindergarten in your room? What ideas in the chapter might make the transition less challenging for them and their families?

“Routines, Rituals, and Mantras for Building a Joyful Classroom in Kindergarten: Reflections from a Small Mountain Community Classroom” describes joyful everyday practices the authors have used with kindergartners and the power of those practices for building and sustaining a caring, equitable learning community. **Consider:** What routines, rituals, and mantras contribute to the development of your own community of learners? What additional practices can you employ? The authors found home visits to be helpful in beginning to establish a reciprocal relationship with families. For families who may not feel comfortable with home visits, what are some alternative ways to get to know families and children before school begins?

“Supporting Self-Regulation and Autonomy in Kindergarten: One Teacher’s Journey” describes the changes a teacher made as she moved from controlling her students’ learning environment to providing a child-centered, teacher-facilitated one in which children have opportunities to develop executive function skills

and autonomy. **Consider:** What opportunities do you provide students to develop executive function skills? In what other ways does this chapter inspire you to support children’s autonomy?

“How Do I See Myself? How Do Others See Me? Exploring Identity in Kindergarten” shares one teacher’s approach to exploring self-identity with young children, with strategies for engaging in conversations with and providing appropriate, meaningful experiences for kindergartners. **Consider:** In what ways do you already explore similarities and differences with kindergartners? How can you dig more deeply into the topic of self-identity with your students?

“Becoming Upended: Teaching and Learning About Race and Racism with Young Children and Their Families” shares powerful stories about, and strategies for, talking with young children about race and racism and responding to families’ feelings and concerns within trusting relationships—strategies supported by research. **Consider:** What feelings arise when you dig deeper into your own experiences with racism? How can you use your experiences, feelings, and new knowledge to have honest, though potentially difficult, conversations with children and families?

NEXT STEPS

1. List the ways in which you intentionally support positive relationships with your students and their families as well as relationships between students. Think about the impact of those strategies on your students’ success. What areas are strong? Which may need improvement? What additional strategies can you implement?
2. Read NAEYC’s position statement on advancing equity ([NAEYC.org/resources/position-statements/equity](https://naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/equity)) to learn more about identity, race, and racism and explore your own understandings, experiences, and emotions. What biases do you have based on your own experiences, and how do those biases affect your interactions with young children? Which specific ideas challenge your thinking? Are there areas in which you would like to change, and how could changes impact your practice? Talk to a trusted colleague or friend and journal your thinking as you explore these topics.
3. Implement a new routine, try a different ritual, or create a new mantra with your students. How is this practice supportive of children?

References for the chapters in this part can be accessed online at [NAEYC.org/dap-focus-kindergarten](https://naeyc.org/dap-focus-kindergarten).