# NAEYC Principles of Child Development

NAEYC principles of child development and learning that inform developmentally appropriate practice:

1. Domains of children's development--physical, social, emotional, and cognitive--are closely related.

2. Development occurs in a relatively orderly sequence, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired.

3. Development proceeds at varying rates from child to child as well as unevenly within different areas of each child's functioning.

4. Early experiences have both cumulative and delayed effects on individual children's development; optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning.

5. Development proceeds in predictable directions toward greater complexity, organization, and internalization.

6. Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts.

7. Children are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experience as well as culturally transmitted knowledge to construct their own understandings of the world around them.

8. Development and learning result from interaction of biological maturation and the environment, which includes both the physical and social worlds that children live in.

9. Play is an important vehicle for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as a reflection of their development.

10. Development advances when children have opportunities to practice newly acquired skills as well as when they experience a challenge just beyond the level of their present mastery.

11. Children demonstrate different modes of knowing and learning and different ways of representing what they know.

12. Children develop and learn best in the context of a community where they are safe and valued, their physical needs are met, and they feel psychologically secure.

**Principle 1:** Domains of children's development--physical, social, emotional, and cognitive--are closely related. The three domains listed earlier demonstrate just one method of dividing up the phases of human growth. Domains can also be separated into other categories, just as the stages of childhood can be broken up in many ways. For example, we could use as many six categories if we looked separately at fine motor, large motor, social, emotional, cognitive, and

language development. The categories themselves are less important than the relationship between them.

Domain development is always interrelated. The younger the child, the more evident this usually is. For example, infants learning to crawl use all domains together. Motor development allows the baby to use his limbs and eyes to see, while the desire and thought involved with locomotion involves both the cognitive and social/emotional domains.

The connectedness of domains is also evident in how development in one area can either facilitate or limit development in another area. For instance, no matter how cognitively ready a child is to write, she will be unable if she is not physically ready.

**Principle 2:** Development occurs in a relatively orderly sequence, with later abilities, skills, and knowledge building on those already acquired.

The sequence in which children learn is more important than exactly when they reach milestones. “The critical consideration is the order in which children acquire these developmental skills, not their age in month and years,” according to the authors of “Developmental Profiles” (Allen & Marotz, 2003). For example, babies need to first roll over before they can sit or crawl, and crawling is an important developmental step to walking. Sometimes there are lags, or even steps backward, as development is not always smooth and steady. I remember that there was a definite (and exasperating) lag between when one of my babies could pull to a stand and when he figured out how to get down without falling. Earlier is not necessarily better.

**Principle 3:** Development proceeds at varying rates from child to child as well as unevenly within different areas of each child’s functioning.

Development varies because children are all individuals with their own styles, strengths, interests, environments, and patterns of development. Some learn best visually while others need auditory or tactile approaches. Recent theories have expanded our understanding of learning modes to include various multiple “intelligences” (Gardner, 1983) and “100 languages” (Malaguzzi, 1993) to describe how children understand and represent their experiences. Understanding the needs and abilities common to children of a certain age is not enough. Recognition of individual differences, ways of learning, and expression of development are essential for practices to be individually appropriate.

Children may also vary in how each domain develops. For example, a child who is not very physical might develop much faster in the cognitive/language domain than in others. Often these lags and spurts will even out over time. For example, I was concerned about a preschooler’s large motor development even though she was advanced in her fine motor skills. Once she had accomplished what she needed to in that area of her development, her focus shifted and her large motor skills quickly caught up. Other times a child will have a stronger or weaker domain (like my son, whose development was advanced in all areas except fine motor). It is important that teachers recognize individual patterns and learning modes so they can help children reach their potential in all domains by building on their strengths.

**Principle 4:** Early experiences have both cumulative and delayed effects on individual children’s development; optimal periods exist for certain types of development and learning. Recent research has shown that the brain’s neurological development is formed in large part by

children's early experiences, positive and negative. We now know that the brain actually grows itself to fit the environment in which a child lives (Dana Alliance for Brain Initiatives, 1996). This means that the care babies receive in their first years can have a lasting impact, which may be immediate and/or delayed. Experiences that only happen occasionally do not have the same cumulative (or "snowballing") effect as those that happen regularly (Wieder & Greenspan, 1993).

**Principle 5:** Development proceeds in predictable directions toward greater complexity, organization, and internalization. Research shows that development generally processes in a predictable, orderly way. Children move from the simple to the complex, general to specific, global to differentiated, concrete to symbolic, and large to small (Bruner 1983; Gallahue 1993; Case & Okamoto, 1996). For example, children first make random sounds and by the end of their first year may be saying recognizable words. Soon they are fluent enough to play with language or use it inappropriately (such as potty talk).

Expected development occurs in all domains, but cultural context may cause these changes to be evidenced and/or valued in different ways. For example, most Western families encourage and reward reaching certain developmental milestones as soon as possible, while other cultures might do the very opposite (such as trying to delay children walking early so they can stay safely strapped to the parent while he or she works).

**Principle 6:** Development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts. "Rules of development are the same for all children, but social contexts shape children's development into different configurations" (Bowman, 1994). Culture can be defined as "the customary beliefs and patterns of and for behavior, both explicit and implicit, which are passed on to future generations by the society they live in and/or by a social, religious, or ethnic group" (NAEYC position statement, p.7).

Twentieth-century theorists such as Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner showed that the sociocultural context profoundly impacts development. Without understanding the cultural influences on learning and development, caregivers cannot truly meet the individual needs of children. For example, when I taught young toddlers, I liked to ruffle their hair as a sign of affection. While this may have felt loving to many children, an increased understanding of South Asian culture helped me realize that it may have felt disrespectful to children of that ethnic group.

**Principle 7:** Children are active learners, drawing on direct physical and social experience as well as culturally transmitted knowledge to construct their own understandings of the world around them.

**Principle 8:** Development and learning result from interaction of biological maturation and the environment, which includes both the physical and social worlds that children live in. Most current research supports the notion that it is the interplay between genetics and environment that is responsible for human development. Neither nature nor nurture alone is responsible for the variance in development, but rather the interaction of the two together (Scarr & McCartney, 1983; Plomin, 1994). For example, a child may be born with the genetic capacity for high intelligence but will not reach this biological potential if raised in a deficient environment.

**Principle 9:** Play is an important vehicle for children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as a reflection of their development. Learning and development is constructivist, meaning that children need to interact with their environments in order to make

sense of their worlds. Play is essential to the process of this construction of knowledge. Play supports development in all the domains, physical, cognitive, and social/emotional (Herron & Sutton-Smith, 1971). Young children need environments and opportunities to practice and process their experiences. Their learning and development are limited if children are expected to be merely passive recipients of knowledge. “Play gives children opportunities to understand the world, interact with others in social ways, express and control emotions, and develop their symbolic capabilities. Children’s play gives adults insights into children’s development and opportunities to support the development of new strategies” (NAEYC position statement, p. 8).

**Principle 10:** Development advances when children have opportunities to practice newly acquired skills as well as when they experience a challenge just beyond the level of their present mastery. Children who are frustrated by tasks that are too difficult can easily become discouraged and lose motivation (Brophy, 1992). They also can lose interest when activities are too easy and boring. It is crucial, therefore, for adults to provide opportunities for children to both gain competence through practicing new skills and push themselves to the next level. A balance will enable children to gain confidence through repetition and work on their “growing edge” with adult support, or scaffolding (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Bodrova & Leong, 1996).

**Principle 11:** Children demonstrate different modes of knowing and learning and different ways of representing what they know. Although development happens in a predictable and orderly way, there is tremendous individual variation in precisely when and how development occurs. Most children still fall within the typical range of development, but some may differ enough that the child is identified as having special needs, or atypical development. Specific disabilities will be addressed in upcoming chapters.

**Principle 12:** Children develop and learn best in the context of a community where they are safe and valued, their physical needs are met, and they feel psychologically secure. This principle follows Maslow’s model of a hierarchy of needs, in which physical and psychological needs for safety and security must be met before learning can occur. One of children’s essential needs is for emotional attachment. Young children must have at least one positive and consistent primary relationship to develop optimally (Bowlby, 1969; Stern, 1985).