

TATS eUpdate  
Curriculum and Learning Environment

**Developmentally Appropriate Practice – Adaptive/Self-Help Skills**

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This is the fourth eUpdate that explores developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) in prekindergarten (Pre-K) programs. DAPs are based on a developmental perspective model that suggests that development occurs along a natural course within each child and is unique to that child. The theoretical approaches of Piaget, Dewey, and Erikson are examples of developmental models.

The two components of DAP address “appropriateness”—age appropriateness and individual appropriateness. Age appropriateness refers to the general growth and changes that a typically developing child will go through in the first eight years of life. These changes are predictable and occur in all areas of development (communication—receptive and expressive language; cognition; social emotional; physical—fine and gross motor; and adaptive/self-help). Individual appropriateness refers to the unique qualities of each child and that child’s individual patterns of development, including physical growth, personality, ways of learning, interests, and family background and culture.

Teachers who support DAP are knowledgeable about human development and recognize the unique differences among each child. They are able to create classroom settings and plan activities that will better match the child’s developing abilities while respecting their unique interests. (Source: Parent Tip sheet #13 – Terrific Transitions, p.1; <http://center.serve.org/tt/partip13.pdf> )

Teachers who support DAP recognize that young children have diverse backgrounds and experiences. The many factors that vary in a child’s life—how a child learns to socialize with others, the experiences the child has before coming to school, the child’s cultural and/or ethnic background, and individual learning style—necessitate the use of many teaching methods. When we address these differences, we celebrate each child’s uniqueness in the process.

In this update we will look at DAP for the adaptive/self-help skill development. Below is a table containing data on developmental milestones in adaptive/self-help skill skills for children from 24 (2 years) to 60 months (5 years). Skill acquisition will vary from child to child; therefore, these charts should not be used for diagnostic purposes.

Age in months	Self-Help Skills
24 – 36	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeds self with little spilling</li> <li>• Holds spoon independently</li> <li>• Undresses with no help</li> <li>• Can take off coat and put on with assistance</li> <li>• Can turn a door handle</li> <li>• Incomplete tooth brushing</li> <li>• Can wash and dry hands with adult assistance</li> <li>• Toileting - expresses verbal anticipation; control during the day; needs reminders</li> </ul>
36 – 48	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can pour from a small pitcher</li> <li>• Can spread soft substances with a knife</li> <li>• Unties bows, unbuckles belt, unzips zippers</li> <li>• Buttons and unbuttons large buttons</li> <li>• Can wash hands and body independently</li> <li>• Wipes nose without being told</li> <li>• Toileting – control at night; may need help with wiping; goes to the bathroom independently</li> </ul>
48 – 60	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can cut with a knife independently</li> <li>• Can put shoes on right feet; ties shoes</li> <li>• Knows clothing front from back</li> <li>• Toileting – fully independent</li> <li>• Brushes teeth independently</li> </ul>

Adapted from Cook, Klein, & Tessier. (2008). *Adapting early childhood curricula for children with special need*, and other sources.

**Best Practice**

Establishment of adaptive skills, such as dressing, feeding, or personal hygiene, comprises a large part of the young child’s daily routine. If motor skills development is compromised, self-care may be impacted as well. Motor movements are prerequisite skills that are also necessary for many self-care tasks. When the fine motor skills overlap with adaptive/self-help skills, they are known as activities of daily living (ADL). Adaptive/self-help skills can also overlap in the skill areas of communication, cognition, and social skills. They encompass all aspects of a child’s life—at home, at school, and in the community. Developing appropriate self-help skills provides a child with skills needed to survive and thrive in all settings throughout their lifetimes.

Adaptive/self-help skills are extremely important in fostering independence and confidence in a child. Children need to develop confidence in their own ability and to be self-reliant. “Autonomy in the early childhood years takes the form of basic skill

development, such as learning independent mobility or independent personal care.” (Raver, 2009, p. 268) Acquiring these skills can also alleviate the “learned helplessness” that can occur when teachers do not challenge or hold high expectations for children with disabilities. “Slower acquisition, paired with well-intentioned, but overly intrusive instructional strategies, such as too frequent verbal and physical prompts, may limit opportunities for the young child with significant disabilities to have autonomous experiences.” (Raver, 2009, p. 268)

**Promoting adaptive/self-help skill development in the classroom:**

From *Building Blocks for Teaching Preschoolers with Special Needs* (Sandall and Schwartz, 2008, p.166)

- Independent classroom behavior in preschool includes:
  - Making independent transitions within the classroom and school (e.g., walking from the classroom to the playground without holding the teacher’s hand)
  - Managing personal possessions and classroom materials appropriately (e.g., hanging up coat and backpack in cubby)
  - Completing developmentally appropriate tasks without adult assistance
  - Staying engaged in a developmentally appropriate play activity
  - Actively participating in a developmentally appropriate group activity
  - Appropriately completing self-care tasks, such as those involved in toileting, dressing, eating, and personal hygiene (e.g., nose care)

Other ways to promote these skills:

- Provide opportunities for children to complete tasks independently, with an adult nearby to assist, if necessary
- Ensure the equipment and materials in the classroom (i.e. toilets, sinks, chairs, tables) are child-sized
- Have developmentally age-appropriate expectations for all children in the classroom
- Promote and teach whatever skills are necessary for children to function more completely, competently, adaptively, and independently in their natural environment

**Promote self-help/adaptive skill development:**

Morning circle:

- Use a calendar as a teaching tool
  - Sequencing—use removable calendar numbers of differing shapes and colors to place on the calendar
  - Rote counting—count up to each day, and back down to number one
  - Make predictions—ask what shape or number will come next and why
  - Sing songs about the days of the week, seasons, or months of the year

- Weather activities
  - Identify the season and the associated weather
  - Identify the clothes for the weather conditions and why
  - Make predictions about the weather conditions
  - Relate the month to the season
- Sing songs featuring movements and following directions

#### Block play:

- Include a set of safety signs and equipment to help children learn to identify when to “stop,” “go,” “go slow,” “look both ways,” etc.
- Facilitate clean-up—outline toys, blocks or other objects on shelves or place pictures on shelves so children know where to put toys.
- Give children shared jobs, e.g. one child holds a bin, the other puts blocks in.

#### Dramatic play:

- Use toy food (food models) that include breakfast, lunch, and dinners items.
- Provide a variety of cooking utensils and dinnerware
- Provide dolls and toys to care for the dolls (dressing, feeding with spoons or bottles).
- Provide dress-up clothes or dolls with buttons, zippers, or ties.

#### Art/Writing:

- Provide writing or drawing implements (pencils, crayons, paint brushes, chalk) of different sizes.
- Provide magazines for pictures that can be cut out for classifying, identification of object function or to support phonemic awareness.

#### Fine motor/Manipulatives:

- Provide activities, which include stringing of beads or lacing cards.
- Provide paper folding activities.
- Provide small objects (beads, toys, blocks) to place in containers of varying sizes.

#### Book/Listening Area:

- Provide a rich assortment of age-appropriate children’s books from a variety of genres—fact, fantasy, fiction, etc., as well as other meaningful print materials (big books, small books, magazines, popular restaurant menus/table mats, toy catalogues).
- Use a listening area that children can access on their own, which includes books on tape, tape recorder, and head phones.
- Use story felt boards for the telling of stories about skills, such as eating and dressing.

#### Science/Discovery:

- Provide simple cooking experiences (making pudding, gelatin, butter) and activities (spreading soft substances on bread or crackers with a knife)
- Provide water play with small pitchers, glasses.

**Outdoor play:**

- Use balls of varying sizes for simple games with rules and following directions
- Provide obstacle courses, swings, climbing apparatus.
- Provide adapted equipment to facilitate participation (e.g., built-up pedals on bicycles).

**Other helpful strategies for fostering self-help/adaptive skill development:**

- Incorporate independence skills within classroom routines—brushing teeth, practice tying bows.
- Teach children the steps needed to complete classroom jobs and routines, such as putting materials away, cleaning up block area, getting ready for snack. Support with picture charts, if necessary.
- Implement task analysis strategies. Analyze a specific activity and identify the steps required to complete that activity. Using these steps, develop a foundational plan for learning, and have the child complete step one of the task. Once the first step is mastered, the teacher can increase expectations by having the child complete steps one and two. This continues until the child is able to complete the task independently.
- Use backward chaining. Provide prompts or assistance (i.e., hand-over-hand assistance) for the entire sequence of steps to complete a task, and gradually remove assistance as the child masters each step.
- Include children in meal preparation, setting the table, and clean-up.
- Place pictures next to toilets or sinks to illustrate steps for toileting or washing hands.
- Provide supports:
  - Physical supports—proximity, touching and/or physically helping a child complete one step of a task
  - Instructional supports—teacher directions, comments, praise, and encouragement
  - Environmental supports—pictures, charts, or other visual supports, ramps, large print books, etc.

**Reflection**

What are some things a classroom teacher can do to increase a child's self-confidence and sense of accomplishment?

*Listening to children shows our respect for them and builds their self esteem.*

- P. Petrie

**References and Resources**

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**Technical Assistance & Training System (TATS)**

TATS is a statewide project providing technical assistance and training to programs in Florida serving prekindergarten children with disabilities. The TATS website provides information and resources on curriculum and instruction, evaluation and assessment, family involvement, inclusion, program effectiveness/quality, and transition, as well as links to early childhood partners. <http://www.tats.ucf.edu>

TATS eUpdates are a service of the Technical Assistance & Training System Communities of Practice. The TATS eUpdates are intended to provide current information related to best practices or trends in the education of young children with special needs in the areas of Transition, Program Effectiveness, Inclusion, Curriculum & Instruction, Evaluation & Assessment, and Family Involvement. For more information about the TATS Communities of Practices and the TATS eUpdates, please log on to <http://www.tats.ucf.edu>.