

Language Reframes

Developmentally Appropriate

Though Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) is a policy approach most often associated with the USA, the terminology and its principles are frequently carried into UK thinking and practice. DAP is positioned as a neutral, research-backed approach, yet it does not acknowledge which bodies of knowledge have shaped our dominant understandings of child development. As a result, it reinforces a **developmental status quo** where white, Western, middle class, heteronormative, neuronormative and able-bodied expectations are treated as the right or ideal way to develop.

This framing erases the experiences, funds of knowledge and cultural nuances present in diverse and decolonised understandings of child development. From a disability justice perspective, DAP is fundamentally problematic because it relies on a presumption of typical development. This presumption excludes neurodivergent and disabled children from the outset by positioning their developmental pathways as deviations rather than valid, meaningful ways of developing.



Developmentally Meaningful



Developmentally Meaningful practice (DMP) is a term coined by Diverse Pathways for Early Childhood to capture the unique developmental experiences of children which account for their lived experience, funds of knowledge and developmental pathway. DMP requires us to ask, not what is appropriate but what is meaningful to this child in this moment? From an anti-racism and anti-ableist perspective, it enables educators to resist the pressures imposed on them to normalise and integrate children into experiences that do not honour their unique experiences.



Full Guidance available at www.diversepathways.org

Question Prompts

1. Whose **developmental knowledge** am I relying on, and who is missing from that picture?
2. What **assumptions** am I making about what a child “should” be doing at this age?
3. Am I prioritising what is **appropriate in theory**, or what is **meaningful** for this child in this moment?
4. How might my interpretation of a child’s behaviour or learning be shaped by **normative expectations**?
5. In what ways could this child’s actions represent a **valid developmental pathway** rather than a deviation?
6. Does my response **honour the child’s lived experience**, sensory needs and cultural context?
7. Am I asking the child to adapt to the environment, or am I **adapting the environment to the child**?
8. How might ableism, racism or developmental **bias** show up in my everyday decisions?
9. Whose **comfort is being protected** when I intervene, redirect or correct?
10. What would it look like to design learning that supports **multiple developmental pathways**, not just one?



Full Guidance available at www.diversepathways.org

Lineage Statement and References

Lineage and Reference Influences

This work draws on and is deeply indebted to a lineage of thinkers, practitioners, and pioneers who continue to reshape contemporary understandings of child development, neurodiversity, and inclusion.

- **Tricia Hersey** – founder of The Nap Ministry and author of *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (2022), reframing rest as a portal to liberation.
- **Sandra Dalton-Smith** – physician and author of *Sacred Rest: Recover Your Life, Renew Your Energy, Restore Your Sanity* (2017), articulating seven distinct types of rest.
- **Dr Amy Laurent and Dr Jacquelyn Fede** – co-founders of Autism Level Up, whose frameworks reimagine energy regulation, engagement, and everyday supports as accessible, affirming, and practical.
- **Sonny Jane Wise** – activist and author of *We're All Neurodiverse* (2022), whose work amplifies neurodiversity as identity, culture, and lived experience.
- **Warda Farah** – speech and language therapist, educator, and writer centring anti-racist, anti-ableist, and neurodiversity-affirming approaches to communication and education.
- **Dr Abi Miranda** – educational psychologist and researcher advancing inclusive, relational, and strengths-based practices in early childhood settings through an anti-racist lens.
- **Hailey R. Love** – researcher and advocate whose scholarship interrogates deficit-framed models of disability and calls for justice-oriented early childhood practice.
- **Liz Pemberton (The Black Nursery Manager)** – anti-racist trainer, consultant, and speaker amplifying equity, justice, and critical reflection in the early years sector.
- **Helen Edgar (Autistic Realms)** – writer, educator, and advocate whose reflections on autistic lived experience, relational safety, and sensory authenticity continue to inform more humane, neurodivergent-led understandings of development.
- **Ryan Boren (Stimpunks Foundation)** – activist, writer, and systems thinker whose work on human-centred design, access intimacy, and neurodiversity justice challenges exclusionary structures and offers radically affirmative alternatives.

This lineage is partial and ever-evolving; I remain indebted to the wider communities of scholars, practitioners, activists, families, and children themselves whose insights, challenges, and lived experiences continue to shape and expand this work.

References

- Menon, N., 2025. Reimagining anti-racist pedagogy in early childhood education: Foregrounding critical theories and frameworks that challenge racism. *Journal of Childhood, Education & Society*, 6(3).
- Newton, J.R., Batz, R., O'Grady, C., Vinh, M. and Blanchard, S.B., 2024. Beyond omission: Analysing the erasure of disability and inclusion in the developmentally appropriate practices. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 32(3), pp.647-657.
- Burman, E., 2019. Child as method: Implications for decolonising educational research. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 28(1), pp.4-26.
- Souto-Manning, M. and Rabadi-Raol, A., 2018. (Re) centering quality in early childhood education: Toward intersectional justice for minoritized children. *Review of Research in Education*, 42(1), pp.203-225.

Full Guidance available at www.diversepathways.org

