



Explanation of terms

Age-appropriate pedagogies for the early years of schooling



Age-appropriate pedagogies in the early years

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) sets out the curriculum (what is taught) leaving teachers to make decisions about pedagogies (how it is taught). Age-appropriate pedagogies in the early years are learner-centred, involve the scaffolding of learning, and engage children actively in learning. The following process is involved in enacting age-appropriate pedagogies, and explained in further detail below.

- Identify pertinent characteristics.
- Select an approach/approaches.
- Identify practices from the repertoire of practices associated with the selected approach.
- Select strategies.
- Select and construct (co-construct) learning experiences.
- Reflect on the age-appropriateness of the approach, practices and strategies used, and the embedded characteristics.

Characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies

Age-appropriate pedagogies have particular characteristics. These characteristics do not relate to every learner, learning context or desired outcome, nor do they all need to be present within any given learning experience. Instead, they represent a set of desirable qualities that educators can consider when trying to be responsive to the individual child, context and purpose of learning. Here are some identified characteristics of age-appropriate pedagogies:

Active – requiring physical and embodied engagement across all areas of learning. Whether this is indoors or outdoors, activity is essential in order to activate children’s full potential. Their focus, concentration, motivation and self-regulation are enhanced through moving, doing, and interacting within a range of learning environments.

Agentic – ensuring that children have voice in their learning. Their ideas and interests initiate, support and extend learning possibilities in order to build on their real-world understandings and experiences.

Collaborative – being social and co-constructed. Children and educators work together to identify ways of learning and understanding through sustained shared thinking and action.

Creative – inviting children to consider “what if?” They encourage investigation, inquiry and artistry to explore new possibilities and ways of thinking.

Explicit – making conscious, for both learner and educator, the relationships between the learning purpose and processes employed and the skills and understandings these processes support.

Language rich and dialogic – ensuring that learning occurs in environments where rich language is modelled and employed by both children and educators. Meaningful dialogues between children, as well as between children and educators, are created to support thinking, learning, engagement and imagination.

Learner focused – recognising that all children learn in different ways and that learning is a highly individual process. They also acknowledge differences in children’s physical, intellectual, cultural, social and personal experiences and perspectives.

Narrative – acknowledging the important role that personal, written, oral and digital stories play in all our lives. They support both the production and comprehension of narratives through active processes, especially play.

Playful – encouraging children to make connections through imagination and creativity to explore alternate worlds and ways of thinking. These worlds, not bounded by reality, offer the freedom children need to innovate and enact new possibilities.

Responsive – incorporating a willingness to be flexible, to ensure that learning is always child, context, content and discipline appropriate. To achieve this, educators will balance opportunities for structure and spontaneity, open-ended and specific tasks, and child-led and educator-led learning.

Scaffolded – including such actions as modelling, encouraging, questioning, adding challenges, and giving feedback, provide the support needed to extend children’s existing capabilities. Effective scaffolding by both educators and other children provides active structures to support new learning; it is then progressively withdrawn as learners gain increasing mastery.

A range of teaching approaches

A range of teaching approaches may be considered age-appropriate for teaching the Australian Curriculum in the early years, with their appropriateness being determined by how effectively they incorporate the characteristics of pedagogies as outlined above or within early years’ literature. When selecting an approach, teachers need to consider the participants, context, purpose, and duration of the learning experiences, whilst also taking account of the age, background, and abilities of individual learners, and the interests of both children and teachers. The appropriateness of assessment tasks in the light of chosen teaching approach/approaches also needs to be considered.

Repertoires of practices and associated teaching strategies

Each approach has its own repertoire of practices and associated teaching strategies. These practices and strategies are not always easy to delineate, but when considered together they serve to distinguish one approach from another.

Here are some approaches and their accompanying practices and strategies. Please remember that this is not an exclusive, or an exhaustive list of approaches, practices and strategies, but serves as a foundation for teacher discussion and reflection.

Inquiry learning

Inquiry-based learning begins with a question, problem or idea. It involves children in planning and carrying out investigations, proposing explanations and solutions, and communicating their understanding of concepts in a variety of ways. Throughout the inquiry process, children observe, raise questions, and critique their practices. It is an approach that encourages collaboration and can be used effectively in a trans-disciplinary way or in most subject areas.

If utilised effectively, possible characteristics may include: active, agentic, collaborative, creative, scaffolded.

Inquiry learning <i>Short-term or long-term</i>	
Examples of practices within approach	Examples of strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teacher or child-initiated (in response to a question, problem or idea)• Uses a set process (e.g. questioning, planning and predicting, investigating, recording and reporting, reflecting)• Facilitates active learning processes (e.g. inferring, hypothesizing, measuring, predicting, classifying, analysing, experimenting, generalising and formulating conclusions)• Uses an iterative and responsive process to foster learning• Provides opportunities for children to make decisions/choices (be agentic)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Co-constructs plans with children• Provides opportunities for active learning – experiences are open-ended• Uses KWL• Scaffolds processes by curating resources and materials• Uses questioning judiciously to check for understanding, and to challenge/extend thinking

Play-based learning

Play-based learning provides opportunities for children to actively and imaginatively engage with people, objects and the environment. Symbolic representation is a critical aspect. When playing, children may be organising, constructing, manipulating, pretending, exploring, investigating, creating, interacting, imagining, negotiating and making sense of their worlds. It promotes the holistic development (physical, social, emotional, cognitive and creative) of a child and depending on how it is utilised, may also support a broad range of literacy and numeracy skills. The teacher’s role in scaffolding play is pivotal.

If utilised effectively, possible characteristics may include: active, agentic, collaborative, creative, scaffolded.

Play-based learning <i>Short-term or long-term</i>	
Examples of practices within approach	Examples of strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher or child-initiated and directed • Constructs opportunities for play within the program • Promotes and responds to opportunities for spontaneous, imaginative, and life-like play • Models, supports, initiates and generates play to include the use of (for example) miniature worlds, socio-dramatic, puppet, media, block, sand, water • Collaborates with children to promote learning in play • Guides play (before, during and after) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-constructs play environments with children or provides opportunity for children to construct their own • Supports the play from outside the action by asking questions • Adopts a role to support children’s socio-dramatic play • Adds literacy resources (e.g., writing materials) to the socio-dramatic play space • Provides open-ended resources to support symbolic transformation • Uses pre and post play discussions to build enthusiasm and identify narrative possibilities • Models relevant language and introduces vocabulary • Assists children to document, annotate and share their play experiences

Project approach

A project approach is an in-depth exploration of a topic that may be child or teacher-initiated and involve an individual, a group of children, or the whole class. A project may be short-term or long-term depending on the level of children’s interest. What differentiates the project approach from an inquiry one is that within the project approach there is an emphasis on the creation of a specific outcome that might take the form of a spoken report, a multimedia presentation, a poster, a demonstration or a display. The project approach provides opportunities for children to take agency of their own learning and represent this learning through the construction of personally meaningful artefacts.

If utilised effectively, possible characteristics may include: active, agentic, collaborative, explicit, learner-focused, responsive, scaffolded, playful, language-rich and dialogic.

Project approach <i>Short-term or long-term</i>	
Examples of practices within approach	Examples of strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiated by interest or purpose (teacher or child initiated) • Consists of active, multi-modal and goal-oriented activities • Oriented towards a shared outcome or the creation of a product • Provides opportunities for individuals or small groups to explore aspects of the project topic that are of specific interest to them • Provides opportunities for children to negotiate the medium used for creating and sharing (may incorporate multiple pathways, approaches, representations) • Usually involves a three-step process that includes planning, exploration and culmination • Encourages collaboration and cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scaffolds and guides scope and sequence • Initiates opportunities for children’s agency and voice • Scaffolds the sharing of plans in oral or written form (often daily) • Observes and checklists skills and processes being applied by individuals • Provides resources to support projects • Works in collaboration with the resource teacher • Scaffolds the presentation of outcomes (and products) in oral or written form

Explicit instruction

Explicit instruction is a structured and systematic approach to teaching academic skills. Archer and Hughes (2011, p.1) explain that it is “characterized by a series of supports or scaffolds, whereby students are guided through the learning process with clear statements about the purpose and rationale for learning the new skill, clear explanations and demonstrations of the instructional target, and supported practice with feedback until independent mastery has been achieved.” They go on to say that there is an emphasis on proceeding in small steps, checking for understanding, and achieving active and successful participation by all children.

If utilised effectively, possible characteristics may include: active, explicit, learner-focused, responsive, and scaffolded.

Explicit instruction <i>Short-term or long-term</i>	
Examples of practices within approach	Examples of strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teaches skills, strategies, vocabulary terms, concepts, and rules that match the children’s instructional needs • Sequences skills logically • Begin lessons with a clear statement of goals and expectations • Reviews prior skills and knowledge before beginning instruction • Provides step-by-step demonstrations • Provide guided and supported practice • Monitors children’s performance closely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gradual Release of Responsibility Model – I do it, We do it, You do it • Uses affirmative and corrective feedback to support and guide learning • Focus on skills, strategies, concepts, or rules that will generalise and/or transfer to many other situations. • Prioritise to ensure efficient use of time • Teacher-led group instruction • Scaffolded support • Targets construction of declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge

Event-based approach

Children’s ideas and decision-making are central to an event-based approach. They are encouraged to plan and enact events in real-life contexts drawing on their experiences. An event-based approach may include investigations, problem-solving, and play. It provides a context for learning that is sustained for the short or long-term and provides opportunities for children to connect knowledge and practice. They draw on knowledge and experiences that are socially and culturally significant from home and the community when planning and enacting events. This approach has been identified as having positive impacts on literacy and numeracy learning.

If utilised effectively, possible characteristics may include: active, agentic, collaborative, creative, explicit, language-rich and dialogic, learner-focused, narrative and playful.

Event-based approach <i>Short-term or long-term</i>	
Examples of practices within approach	Examples of strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Evokes children’s interests and experiences• Orients children towards the staging of an event• Guides careful planning, preparation and often rehearsal• Encourages children to exercise agency throughout• Encourages collaboration and cooperation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scaffolds children’s designs and plans• Models context-specific language and behaviour• Uses questioning to extend and challenge children’s thinking and promote problem-solving• Provides open-ended resources for children to construct/co-construct setting and props for event• Directs and/or stage-manages only when required• Engages in role-play when asked and/or as appropriate

Direct teaching/instruction

Direct teaching/instruction is a step-by-step, lesson-by-lesson approach to teaching which is scripted and follows a pre-determined skill acquisition sequence. The aim of using direct teaching/instruction is to take local variation and teacher/child idiosyncrasy out of instruction (Luke, 2014) and for children to learn through imitation. It is also used as a general term for the teaching of skills by telling or demonstrating. It is a common approach used for the teaching of handwriting, as well as phonics, letters and numerals.

If utilised effectively, possible characteristics may include: explicit and scaffolded.

Direct teaching/instruction <i>Short-term or long-term</i>	
Examples of practices within approach	Examples of strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Teacher-directed instruction (controls content, activities and lesson pacing)• Tells the children the specific content or skills to be learned• Uses pre-planned sequences of content and activities (fixed, linear and incremental)• Uses behaviouristic learning principles (getting children's attention, reinforcing correct responses, providing corrective feedback, practising correct responses)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rote learning, drills, and repetition• Modelling and demonstration• Practice using worksheets and workbooks• Monitoring of outcomes• Explicit use of set management and organisation routines

The selection and construction of learning experiences

Following the process of considering the characteristics of effective age-appropriate pedagogies; the approach/ approaches to be used; the repertoire of practices associated with the selected approach; and possible strategies that underpin the practices, learning experiences are constructed and/or co-constructed with children. Of course other influences on decision-making (see Figure 1) are also considered.

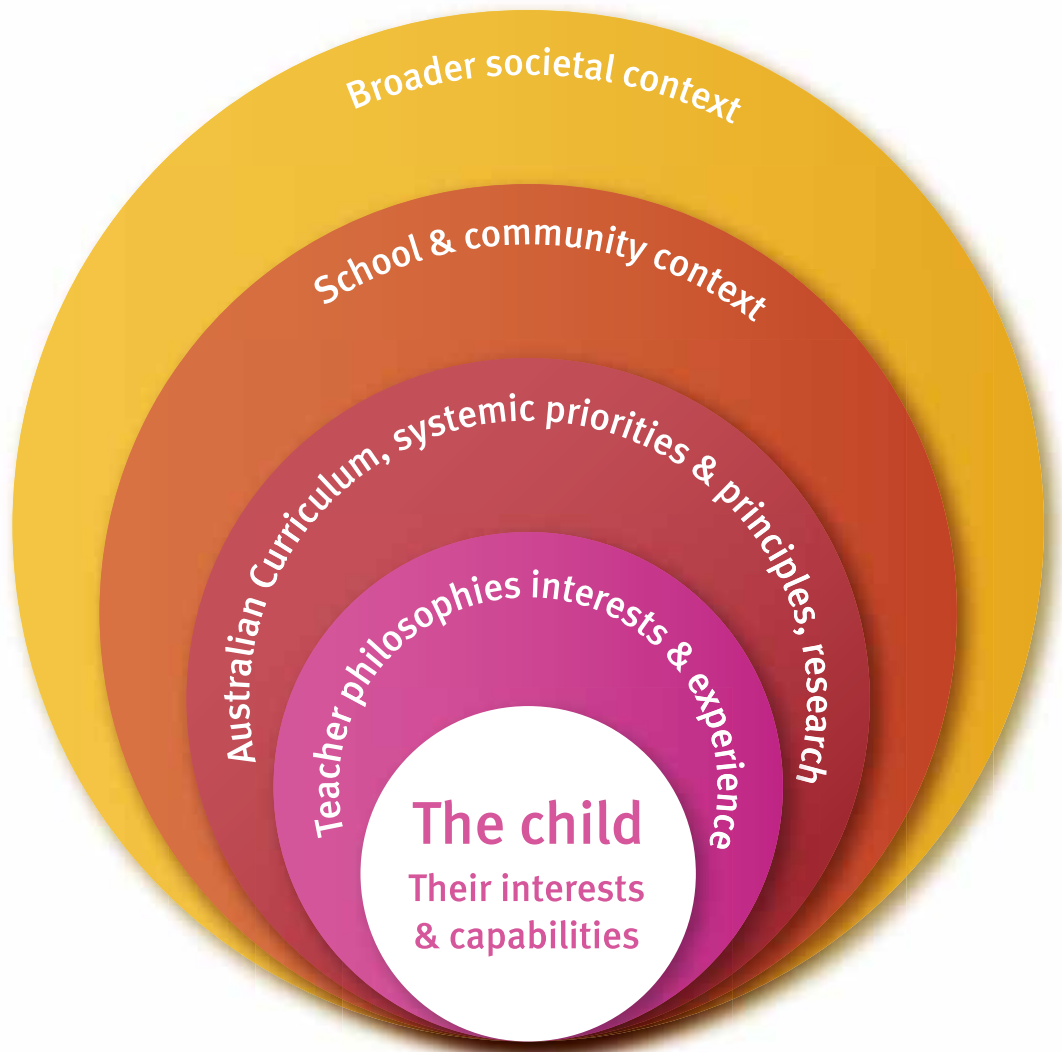


Figure 1. Influences on decision-making

After implementation, reflect on the age-appropriateness of the approach, practices and strategies used, and the embedded characteristics. Use these reflections to inform future practice.

More support and information

For any questions about this publication, characteristics of effective pedagogies or the Age Appropriate Pedagogies Program, please contact:

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