



Planning for Individuality in Preschool Spaces

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Ms. Briana's preschool classroom is abuzz as children explore the room and engage in self-directed play. The room is organized into activity centers that are filled with a variety of materials to inspire them. Each child has their own unique interests, skill sets, and cultural experiences, which Ms. Briana takes into consideration when planning.

Today, her intentional planning efforts are on display: Harrison is playing with cars and blocks along with a few classmates, Maria, Tyson, and Khadija. Through previous observations, Ms. Briana has noticed that Harrison usually plays with the cars by himself. This week, she strategically placed a basket of cars in the block area, where other children play often. This small but impactful shift helps to support Harrison's socialization, communication, and cooperative play.

Children enter preschool with a variety of knowledge, experiences, and abilities. As part of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), early childhood educators are called to individualize their teaching strategies and curricula to meet these specific needs and contexts.

But what does this look like in practice? How do teachers intentionally plan learning experiences that build on children's individual strengths? Following, we (the authors) outline ways that educators can identify children's unique strengths and abilities, then offer examples of individualized lesson plans for different times and activities during the day. We base these practical planning recommendations on our past experiences—both of us worked in general and special education preschool settings for over 15 years and used similar planning tools. Currently, we are university professors working with pre- and in-service preschool teachers with whom we share these approaches.

Understanding Preschool Children's Individuality

DAP calls for educators to develop learning experiences that reflect both what is known about young children in general and about each child in particular. To do this, teachers must understand each child's abilities, characteristics, interests, and contexts. Observation and building relationships with families are key ways to do this.

Observing to Identify Strengths

Observation is crucial during the learning day. It provides educators with meaningful information that may not be shared by families or children, and it offers insights into children's strengths and preferences. For example, when a preschool educator spends time observing children's language skills across different content areas and learning activities, they can start identifying ways to build on each child's strengths and to meet their needs: A child with strong communication skills may need additional opportunities to express their thoughts and ideas (such as creating and sharing stories, role-playing in the dramatic play area, or discussing their work and play in detail). A child who has difficulty communicating in certain modes may need supports, such as picture cards to share their wants and needs, time to practice gestures or signs, or opportunities to engage in back-and-forth exchanges with adults and other children.

When observing, educators can look for and record a variety of skills and characteristics. Some of these may be easier to identify (physical abilities, language, food preferences); some may be more difficult (feelings and emotions, thought processes, culture). Educators can gather vital information by carefully watching and listening each day, in different areas and at different times. To gather meaningful data, they can use a variety of formal and informal techniques, such as running records, anecdotal notes, checklists, and time and event sampling.

Building Relationships with Families

To build on each child's assets, it's crucial that educators connect with families. By building these relationships, teachers will gather insights into children's individual qualities and interests and their home and cultural contexts. This information is key to recognizing each child's unique strengths and to providing a safe, comfortable, and responsive learning environment.

Preschool educators can tap families' expertise in a variety of ways to strengthen school-to-home and home-to-school connections. At the beginning of each year, for example, Ms.

Briana sends home a "Get to Know Me" page for families to share information. She also reaches out by phone or text to share positive observations about a child's first week of school and to invite families' initial questions and thoughts. Besides showing her genuine interest in building reciprocal relationships, these steps guide Ms. Briana as she sets up the learning environment and interacts with each child.

Throughout the school year, Ms. Briana continues to build relationships with families by sending home daily notes that include individualized examples of what their children did that day. She uses small, premade sheets with each center listed. She circles which centers the child participated in that day. The sheet also has blank spaces where Ms. Briana can record the day's snack and the child's favorite activity. She uses snack time to talk with each child and quickly fill out the form. These notes let families know that Ms. Briana checks in with their children individually each day.

Ms. Briana continues to make connections by email, text, and phone calls to share details about children's learning and to help work through any issues if necessary. She uses family-educator conferences for more in-depth conversations, offering different days, times, and formats to accommodate families. She uses all of these points of contact to inform her intentional planning.



Planning for Individuality

As they gather information about each child, educators can begin individualizing their plans for learning experiences. Rather than focusing on a particular activity or routine, this individualization should encompass the entire learning day—self-directed and guided play, small- and large-group experiences, and routines and transitions. Following, we offer some examples of planning for individualization.

Small- and Large-Group Times

When children work in groups, they share their individuality and learn from their peers. Educators can scaffold small and large gatherings by planning activities that build on children’s interests and assets and that encourage them to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings as they work together. (Visit the online version of this article at [NAEYC.org/tyc/spring2024](https://naeyc.org/tyc/spring2024) to see a sample plan for large groups.)

Sample Plan for Small-Group Time			
Activity	Materials	Learning Objectives	Individualization
After reading a book on apple trees, children have questions about how apples grow. I plan a seed-planting activity.	Apples, small cups, dirt, digging tools, water pitcher, paper towels for spills	Children will practice fine motor skills by digging seeds out of apple cores; they will practice measuring and eye-hand coordination by spooning dirt into cups; they will make predictions about when the apple seeds will start to grow.	➤ Max doesn’t like to get his hands sticky or dirty. I will help him use a spoon or other tool to dig out the apple seeds. ➤ Patricio rarely speaks during small-group time. I will share the Spanish words for <i>apple</i>, <i>apple seeds</i>, <i>dirt</i>, and <i>water</i>, along with images of key vocabulary.

Self-Directed and Guided Play

Preschool settings should be intentionally created to nurture and support play and to address each child’s unique interests, strengths, and needs. Educators can do this by rotating a variety of materials and toys that children are interested in. These should represent different races, cultures, genders, family structures, and other aspects of identity.

Sample Plan for Self-Directed and Guided Play			
Learning Center	Materials	Learning Objectives	Individualization
Blocks	After observing children’s interest in the block center, I provide a variety of blocks in different shapes, textures, and sizes; books about buildings; and photos of structures.	Children will work independently and with each other to create block structures.	➤ Cadence is developing her cooperative play skills. The variety of blocks will give her an abundance of materials to use and share. If needed, I will encourage her to work with a peer to build a structure. ➤ Jacob is working on problem solving and becomes easily frustrated when his plan doesn’t immediately work. I will remind him that it’s okay if his first plan doesn’t work out. I will support him to problem solve.
Art	Children are interested in gift wrapping. To encourage this, I provide boxes, scissors, and adhesive.	With my guidance, children will demonstrate fine motor and measurement skills by wrapping boxes.	➤ Stacie is developing her fine motor skills. I will include adaptive scissors and use language to encourage her as she participates in the activity. ➤ Aiesha likes the freedom to move around. I will give children the option to work at a table or on the floor.

Routines and Transitions

Routines (arrival, mealtime, transitions from one activity to another) are an integral part of preschool. During them, children practice many developmental and learning skills. For example, children work on social skills at snack time by waiting their turn; they practice their language and communication skills when they ask for a snack.

At the same time, routines can challenge children who are still developing specific skills. Educators can capitalize on these moments to individualize and scaffold instruction, tapping into children’s strengths and addressing their individual areas for growth.

Sample Plan for Routines and Transitions

Routine and/or Transition	Learning Objectives	Individualization
Arrival time	Children will say good-bye to their families; hang up their coats and backpacks; and sign in for the day.	› Clara has difficulty finding her cubby. To help her and the other children, I will place children’s pictures (or pictures of their families) inside their cubbies.
Mealtime	Children will wash their hands, then gather around the table for lunch.	› Sanjay often becomes upset when he has to transition to the bathroom for handwashing. I will cue him by referencing our visual classroom schedule during the activity leading up to mealtime. Once it’s time for the children to wash their hands, I will sing a transition song to help Sanjay further. I will also put a visual sequence board in the bathroom that breaks down the handwashing steps to make them less overwhelming.

Conclusion

Planning for each and every child in an early learning program is an ongoing process that requires continuous commitment. By honoring each child’s unique strengths and abilities, early childhood educators position individual children for success as they celebrate all of the children and families in their settings.

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