Loving’s not enough: Planning for meaningful learning and authentic assessment

Editor’s note: This is the first of a multi-part series on assessment in early childhood classrooms. This article covers the basics of observing and recording information about a child’s learning. Future issues will cover reflecting on and appraising children’s work, eliciting responses, understanding benchmarks and milestones, and scaffolding children’s learning.

Addressing a group of center directors, a wise consultant describes her years of hiring teachers.

“My first question to the prospective teacher was always the same: ‘Why do you want to work here?’ If the reply was ‘I love children,’ I knew the interview would be short. Loving is never enough!”

The consultant continues with a quiz:

“Do experienced teachers admit to a special affection for some children?” The group agrees that personality, temperament, interests, and energy level can create important bonds with some children.

“And do the same teachers admit to disliking some children?” Enthusiastically the group agrees that some children pose a special challenge—citing variations of the same characteristics that build affection.

“And can teachers provide terrific early care and education experiences for children in spite of emotional preferences?” Here the group gets down to the real business. How do teachers provide the best learning—physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally—for all children, both the ones that are easy to love and those we find difficult even to like?

Wisdom holds that we can love only those things we know. Often the better we know something or someone, the stronger the emotional attachment. Educators are trained to know subjects—literacy development, numeracy, and art processes—and the developmental sequences and milestones met by students as they master content. But sometimes teachers fail to understand that their effectiveness is built on knowing—not just loving—their students.

DOCUMENTATION IS THE CONCRETE EVIDENCE OF CHILDREN’S DEVELOPMENT.

Beyond how teachers feel about particular children (and their families) or specific groups of children, the job is to provide experiences that support growth and development across all domains. Whether you rely on standard themes or units that change daily, weekly, or monthly according to an established time-line, or build your curriculum on developmental goals, milestones, or outcomes, you need tools to help you understand the unique learning style of each child. You need to be able to measure the child’s achievement in areas such as the following:

- Have skills improved?
- Are there lags in development that suggest the need for special services?
- Do you see indications of increased complexity in thinking, talking, and problem solving?
- Can you observe more independence, perseverance, and engagement?
- Is the child showing a particular disposition to learning—reading, counting, or making art, for example—that you can foster, encourage, or guide?
Measuring children’s success—assessment—is critical. It gives teachers a system for identifying a child’s interests, strengths, and weaknesses. It guides you in planning future activities that build on children’s prior knowledge and curiosity. Assessment establishes a framework for self-reflection and evaluation of your role in a child’s learning. And it provides concrete documentation for families who want assurance that participation in your program is worth what it costs.

Technically, early childhood assessment is a process of gathering information from a variety of sources, evaluating and interpreting the information to tell a story about a child’s growth and development, and using that information to plan for or scaffold future learning. Gathering evidence or documenting a child’s development—pouring water into a cup, building a unit block structure with another child, or decoding a new vocabulary word—gives teachers increasing amounts of information about that child and leads to real knowing.

Documentation can be cumbersome at first, but with experience and a few tools you can make it a routine and fluid part of your teaching day. Remember: Documentation is the concrete evidence of children’s development.

Assessment tools
In elementary and high schools, high-stakes standardized tests are the norm. Taxpayer demands and limited education funds force schools to demonstrate maximum bang for the buck, and we hold education agencies, schools, and individual teachers accountable. We expect teachers to prove, with concrete evidence (standardized tests), that students are learning because teachers are educating.

Group-administered standardized tests are inappropriate for assessing young children. These assessment tools tend to focus on the acquisition of simple facts, low-level skills, memorization, and sporadic evidence of achievement that can create barriers to learning instead of more positive dispositions toward learning (Meisels 2000).

While accountability is an appropriate concern in early childhood classrooms, less formal assessments are the norm. We can meet demands for accountability in developmentally appropriate ways. Assessments in early childhood programs best involve three features:

- systematically making and recording observations;
- studying and appraising a child’s work; and
- gathering information about what a child understands by asking questions, engaging in conversations, giving directions, making requests, and taking time for short interviews.

Each feature of an assessment is critical to meaningful classroom planning, measuring children’s growth against accepted benchmarks, and future learning.

In early childhood programs, assessment is never limited to a single source. Even if your program uses formal standardized tests, these need to be used in conjunction with other sources of documentation to gain a complete and useful picture of a child’s skill development over time.

Young children develop in spurts—a focus on developing language skills, for example, may be reflected in a 2-year-old’s clumsiness, toileting accidents, or separation anxiety. Each developmental domain seems to be on its own timeline. By gathering evidence of growth in all domains over time, you can compose a moving picture—active, changing, and growing—rather than a snapshot of the child.

Systematic observations
Just as a movie consists of thousands of snapshots, an assessment is a collection of observations teachers make day-by-day. The observation tools can take many forms—checklists, photographs, dictated stories, and anecdotal records, for example. Each tool helps teachers consider and appraise a child’s development based on what that child demonstrates in everyday classroom activities.

Observations are assessment tools that describe a child and how he or she engages in an interaction, situation, or activity. Observations are one of the simplest ways to gather information on what a child already knows (background knowledge) and to dis-
cover clues about what the child needs for further development.

Observation is part of the daily business of early childhood programs, not a twice-a-year exercise to gather evidence for parent conferences. Look at all developmental domains as well as general health, interactions, motor skills, and language. Remember to keep your observations concrete ("John bit Jen on the arm") and avoid interpretations ("John is mad") and storytelling ("I guess he didn’t get enough sleep, again").

Don’t try to record everything a child does. Just make sure you get a true sampling of every child engaged in every type of activity over the course of a couple of weeks. Do try to make notes of behaviors that are unusual for a particular child, such as quiet isolation in a child who is usually the ringleader or nap time accidents in a child who has established bladder control. When you review notes, watch for patterns and inconsistencies.

Finding time for daily observations can seem challenging. But when it becomes routine—like hand washing—you’ll find the benefits far outweigh the time spent. Organize your records in the way that works best for you. Fortunately, a quick trip to an office supply store can provide handy, portable (and inexpensive) tools for recording your observations. Some ideas:

- Choose published checklists and growth charts carefully, or make up your own based on accepted developmental milestones. Make sure the chart has space for making additional notes.
- Get a collection of sticky notes, index cards, and notepads for note taking. Remember to write the child’s name and the date at the top of the paper. At the end of the day (or at least once a week) transfer the notes to a child-specific notebook page or observation log.
- To make sure you don’t skip a child, preprint sheets of adhesive-backed shipping labels with children’s names and attach the sheets to a clipboard.
- Design a standard observation form that includes spaces for the child’s name, the date, and standard activity or learning areas like language, creativity, problem-solving, social skills, emotional development, and physical growth. Copy the form and hold on a clipboard for quick notes.
- Use electronic tools like voice recorders, cameras, video cameras, and tablet computers. Be sure to set up and practice using the equipment so you actually save time using them.

Observational records

Different types of records can offer unique views of children’s development. Become familiar with the basic tools and modify them as needed for your class. Remember to make sure all notes and observational records are kept confidential.

Developmental checklists are quick and easy to use. Use this assessment tool several times a year—when a child joins your group, midway in the year, and as the child prepares to move to a new class. Checklists are objective and give an overall picture of how the child compares to other children of the same age. Avoid using them as a report card of success or failure but instead as a yardstick of typical development. Make sure the checklist includes all domains of development, a format to note what you observed and didn’t observe as well as the child’s name and the date.

Running records are narratives written over a specified period and recorded while observing a particular child. Running records are especially helpful in identifying the causes and effects of particular behaviors—a toddler who needs an earlier lunch and nap time to avoid noon time tantrums, for example. Use a form or blank paper. Write the child’s name, the date, and the start time. Make short notes every three to five minutes and review the notes made over several days.

Time samplings are quick notes that tell you how a child spends the day. Use symbols or checkmarks to fill in for each period in each classroom area. A time sampling tells you where the child engages but not about the quality of the time spent in the area or the interactions that occur there. See below for an example of a time sampling chart for a child.
**Time sampling**

Name _______________________ Date ________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>W</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7:30</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8:30</td>
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<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B=Blocks; A=Art; M=Manipulatives; H=Housekeeping; S=Science; W=Water

Notes:

**Rating scales** enable you to observe and evaluate behaviors or traits over time. Like a developmental checklist, a rating scale is a tool to use several times during the year. The scale is subjective and its accuracy relies on your unbiased interpretation of a child’s skills. Use a published scale or make your own using standard developmental milestones. On a rating scale you’ll indicate whether a child always, often, sometimes, rarely, or never performs a task successfully.

**Anecdotal records** are narrative descriptions recorded after an observation. This informal method of documentation demands thoughtful recollections of activities, behaviors, and interactions. Over time, anecdotal records provide a complete picture of a child’s personality, temperament, learning style, interests, and language skill. Remember to date the record and to be concrete and specific in your descriptions.

**Electronic recordings**—both audio and visual—provide dramatic evidence of children’s engagement and development. Use audio recorders (even old cassette players) to record children talking to each other, retelling a story, or sharing information about a project. Use cameras—still and movie—to document activities (such as skipping and dramatic play) and projects (such as block building and art). Electronic recordings are especially useful in documenting children’s social interactions. Remember to set the date and time stamp on your electronic device.

**Keeping observations objective**

This chart can help you maintain objectivity in your observations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words and phrases to avoid</th>
<th>Use these instead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>spends a long time</td>
<td>often chooses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>felt</td>
<td>spent _ minutes doing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enjoys</td>
<td>said (with quote)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does very well</td>
<td>consistently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad at</td>
<td>almost every day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>difficult for</td>
<td>observed a pattern of</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Guidelines for observations**

Use these tips when you observe and record for assessment.

- Date your observations. Avoid trusting your memory. It’s easy to confuse a sequence of events when you work with groups of children.
- Write exactly what the child says or does; be concrete and specific. “Marge rode the tricycle around the path for five minutes today,” not “Marge played nicely today.”
- Observe each child over time. Avoid making decisions based on one event or a single interaction. More information will help you make better decisions.
- Stay objective. Record what you hear and see, not what you feel, think, surmise, or interpret.
- Avoid value-laden words like better, more, best, worse, and bad that can be interpreted in many ways.

**References**


Resources