



DAP: Observing, Documenting, and Assessing Children's Development and Learning

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Observing, documenting, and assessing each child's development and learning are essential processes for educators and programs to plan, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of the experiences they provide to children. Assessment includes both formal and informal measures as tools for monitoring children's progress toward a program's desired goals. Educators can be intentional about helping children to progress when they know where each child is with respect to learning goals. Formative assessment (measuring progress toward goals) and summative assessment (measuring achievement at the end of a defined period or experience) are important. Both need to be conducted in ways that are developmentally, culturally, and linguistically responsive to authentically assess children's learning. This means that not only must the methods of assessment, both formal and informal, be developmentally, culturally, and linguistically sensitive, but also the assessor must be aware of and work against the possibility of implicit and explicit bias, for example through training, reflection, and regular reviews of collected data.

Effective assessment of young children is challenging. The complexity of children's development and learning—including the uneven nature of development and the likelihood of children fully demonstrating their knowledge and skills in different contexts—makes accurate and comprehensive assessment difficult. For example, authentic assessment takes into consideration such factors as a child's facility in each language they speak and uses assessors and settings that are familiar and comfortable for the child. When standardized assessments are used for screening or evaluative purposes, the measures should meet standards of reliability and validity based on the characteristics of the child being assessed. When these standards are not met, these limitations must be carefully considered before using the results. Using assessments in ways that do not support enhancing the child's education is not developmentally appropriate practice. Yet,

decisions regarding assessment practices are often outside of the control of individual educators (also see Recommendations for research, page 31). When educators are aware of inappropriate assessment practices, they have a professional ethical responsibility to make their concerns known, to advocate for more appropriate practices, and, within their learning environment, to minimize the adverse impact of inappropriate assessments on young children and on instructional practices.

The following practices for observation, documentation, and assessment are developmentally appropriate for children from birth through the primary grades.

A. Observation, documentation, and assessment of young children’s progress and achievements is ongoing, strategic, reflective, and purposeful. Educators embed assessment-related activities in the curriculum and in daily routines to facilitate authentic assessment and to make assessment an integral part of professional practice. They create and take advantage of unplanned opportunities to observe young children in play and in spontaneous conversations and interactions, in adult-structured assessment contexts as well as when children are participating in a group activity and doing an individual activity. Observations, documentations, and the results of other formal and informal assessments are used to inform the planning and implementing of daily curriculum and experiences, to communicate with the child’s family, and to evaluate and improve educators’ and the program’s effectiveness. Especially in K–3 classrooms, care must be taken to avoid overuse of standardized assessments, which can cause stress for young children and interfere with time for learning. Educators limit the use of digitally-based assessments, especially for young children who (appropriately) should have limited exposure to screen media.

B. Assessment focuses on children’s progress toward developmental and educational goals. Such goals should reflect families’ input as well as children’s background knowledge and experiences. They should be informed by developmental milestones including use of state early learning standards. Goals should be aspirational and achievable and should foster a sense of pride and accomplishment for educators, families, and children. Children, educators, and families should have opportunities to celebrate both small and large achievements, while recognizing that all children need time to build mastery on a current skill before progressing to the next challenge.

C. A system is in place to collect, make sense of, and use observations, documentation, and assessment information to guide what goes on in the early learning setting. Educators use this information in planning curriculum and learning experiences and in moment-to-moment interactions with children—that is, educators continually engage in assessment for the purpose of improving teaching and

learning. Educators also encourage children to use observation and, beginning in the preschool years, documentation to reflect on their experiences and what they have learned.

D. The methods of assessment are responsive to the current developmental accomplishments, language(s), and experiences of young children. They recognize individual variation in learners and allow children to demonstrate their competencies in different ways. Methods appropriate to educators' assessment of young children, therefore, include results of their observations of children, clinical interviews, collections of children's work samples, and children's performance on authentic activities. For children who speak a language the educators do not know, native speakers of the child's language such as family or community members may need to be recruited to assist with the assessment process. A plan should be in place for employing volunteer and paid interpreters and translators as needed and providing them with information about appropriate interactions with young children and ethics and confidentiality, as well as about the features and purposes of the screening or assessment tool. Once collected, the results are explained to families and children (as appropriate) in order to extend the conversations around what is collected, analyzed, and reflected upon.

E. Assessments are used only for the populations and purposes for which they have been demonstrated to produce reliable, valid information. If required to use an assessment tool that has not been established as reliable or valid for the characteristics of a given child or for the intended use, educators recognize the limitations of the findings, strive to make sure they are not used in high-stakes decisions, and advocate for a different measure.

F. Decisions that have a major impact on children, such as enrollment or placement, are made in consultation with families. Such decisions should be based on multiple sources of relevant information, including that obtained from observations of and interactions with children by educators, family members, and specialists as needed.

G. When a screening assessment identifies a child who may have a disability or individualized learning or developmental needs, there is appropriate follow-up, evaluation, and, if needed, referral. Screening is used to identify issues needing more thorough examination by those qualified to do so; it is not used to diagnose or label children. Families are involved as essential sources of information.

Audience: *Administrator (director or principal), Faculty, Family, Student (higher education), Teacher, Trainer*

Age: *Early Primary, Infant/Toddler, Kindergarten, Preschool*

Topics: *NAEYC General, Position Statement, Other Topics, Developmentally Appropriate Practice*

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