

Making Assessment a Part of Your Classroom

Many people think that the time spent assessing children could be better spent teaching. In this booklet we have tried to show you that assessment does not take away from instruction but instead adds to and improves it. To be an integral part of our efforts to help children develop and learn, assessment should be well planned, systematically implemented, and used appropriately.

Getting started

Making assessment a part of your classroom practice can seem overwhelming at first. Here are some suggestions (adapted from McAfee & Leong 2002, 156–158) to help you get started:

Create a learning environment conducive to ongoing assessment. To ensure that you have time during the day to assess, help children learn to work and play on their own, not just in interaction with an adult. Teach them how to move to their next activity, get help, regulate their own behavior, and solve problems on their own or with their classmates. Children are able to learn that assessment is a regular part of what teachers (and learners) do.

Begin and proceed gradually. Only you know your other personal and professional commitments; prior knowledge and skill; teaching responsibilities; and center, school, and family expectations. You might want to start by assessing one developmental or content area, and focus on it until you feel comfortable with the assessment process. Or start with only four or five children, adding more as you learn. Or don't try to get an anecdotal record on each child each day, but get one on two or three children a day.

Start with easy techniques. Start with assessment techniques that are relatively simple. A checklist would be a good first choice, along with making anecdotal notes about what you see children saying and doing.

Stay organized and current. Many teachers take a few minutes at the end of each day to file away notes, completed charts, and other information. At a minimum, it is important to file once a week. Summarize when there is enough information to warrant it. Keep information current enough to be useful in the classroom. For example, you will need last month's notes to document children's progress, but you need more recent information about what children know and can do to plan tomorrow's or next week's activities.

Enlist the aid of other people. Children, specialists, classroom aides and assistants, volunteers, parents, and interns can help with assessment. Coach all nonprofessionals on confidentiality as well as on what they are to do, and select assessment tasks that are appropriate for them. Children can record their own attendance and participation in centers, write their names on and date their work, and perform numerous other assessment-related tasks. When they do this, they begin to take responsibility for their own learning.

Make assessment a regular, normal part of classroom living. One of the big advantages of the classroom assessment approach is that the normal learning and activities of the classroom do not have to be suspended, as they typically are for screening, readiness, or standardized achievement tests. Instead, in the kind of continuous performance assessment this booklet focuses on, information is collected along the way. The intent is to make gathering and recording information "seem so much a part of the ongoing classroom procedure, so focused on [children's] learning" that the children are hardly aware of it (Almy & Genishi 1979, 9).

Claiming your reward

In learning more about how to assess young children, we have the opportunity for professional and personal growth. We are learning new ideas, trying to figure out where they fit together, and struggling to master new skills and to be objective about the highly personal process of teaching. We may find ourselves questioning prior convictions about children's learning as evidence we collect raises doubts. We may even find that we do not like what assessment results reveal.

You may want to keep a journal to record your triumphs and frustrations. You may want to share these with colleagues as you work together to improve assessment practices at your school or center. Or you may want to keep them as a chronicle of your private growth experiences. But do take advantage of the opportunity to learn how professionally and personally satisfying and rewarding it is to know enough about each of the children in your class to plan experiences that are "just right."